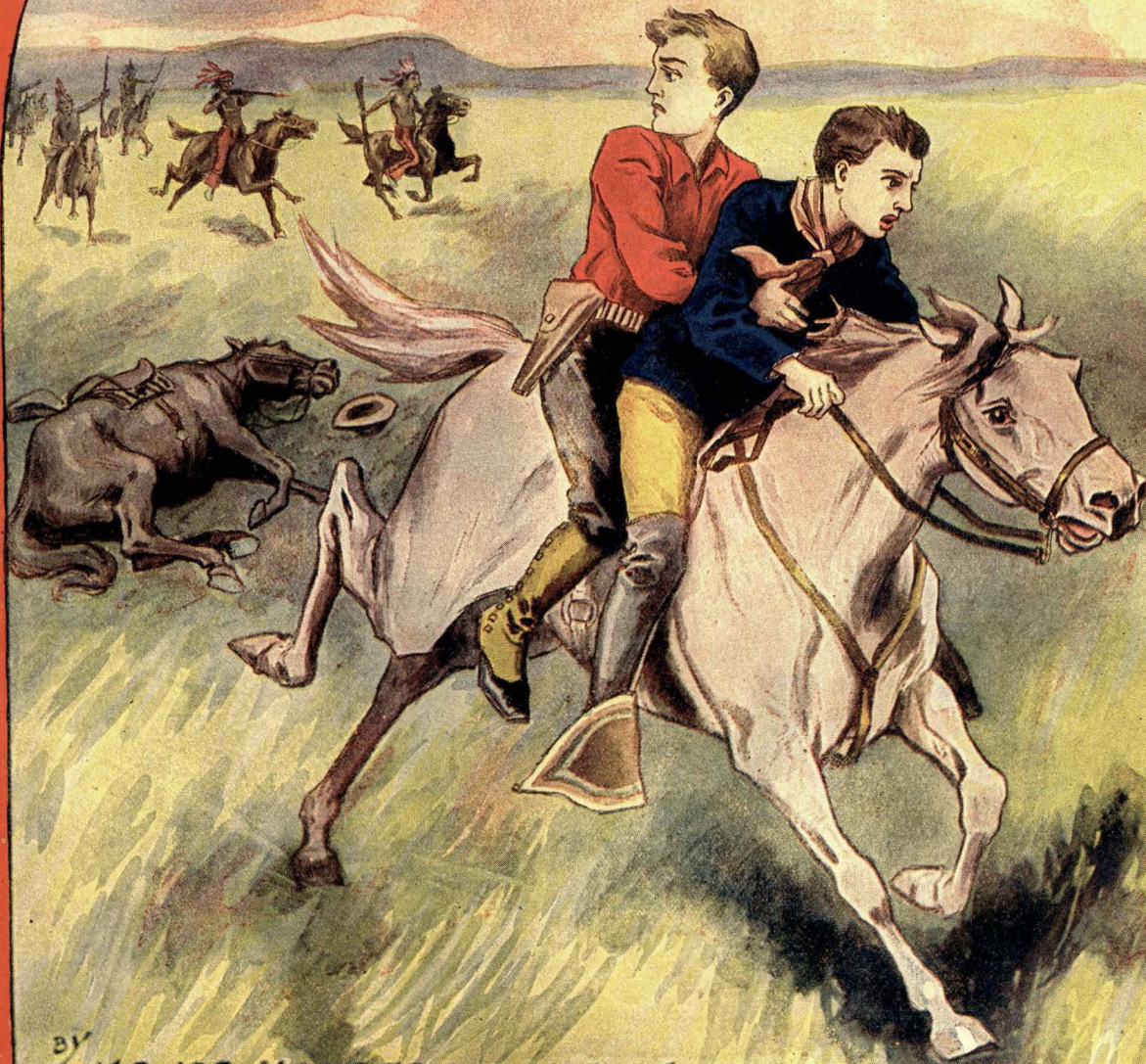


FIVE CENTS

A DIFFERENT COMPLETE STORY EVERY WEEK

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 or The Marvellous Adventures
 of Two Young Hunters



BY MAJOR HERBERT H. CLYDE

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BRAVE & BOLD

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AMONG THE UTES;

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The Marvelous Adventures of Two Young Hunters.

BY MAJOR HERBERT H. CLYDE.

CHAPTER I. IN THE UTE COUNTRY.

Owen and Frank Woodward, two cousins, were riding over the prairie, when the former leaned forward in the saddle and closely examined the footprints of some animal on the ground.

"They are shorter and broader than those of the deer," said he to his companion.

"For the good reason that you are not looking at the trail of a deer," replied Frank, with a smile.

"What the mischief is it then?"

"That of an antelope, and we are likely to get a good shot at one or more of them."

"Can we make the hunt on horseback?"

Frank laughed in his pleasant way as he made answer:

"I suppose it might be done, though I never knew of any one following the sport in that style. I don't think it best that we should try it. We will dismount on the edge of the timber and leave our ponies while we steal through to the opposite side. If we only use care, we are pretty sure to come upon some of the animals, and you will find it better fun than anything you ever indulged in in the 'effete East,' as the expression goes. Our folks will probably drive the game toward us."

A small hunting party, consisting of two brothers, George and Hugh Woodward, and their sons, Owen and Frank, had left St. Louis a week previous, and had been engaged for several days in the North Park, which some years before was one of the most famous breeding grounds of the antelope in the United States. Hunters who entered that open highland region met them in

herds, in groups, in families and singly all through the North Platte country.

Later on the cattlemen and settlers began to occupy the land, while the Ute Indians claimed and held it. They were active and hostile, and many a hunter who ventured into the section paid the penalty with his life.

It was during this transition period, as it may be called, that the Woodward brothers and their sons rode into the region for a couple of weeks' hunting. They met with less success than they anticipated, and decided to shorten their stay. Thus it came about that they were working their way homeward, when on the afternoon of this mild autumn day, they engaged in a hunt for the antelope.

Up to the time named, nothing had been seen of hostile Indians, and the party had come to believe that little was to be feared from them. The brothers, therefore, felt no hesitation in making a long detour to the north, with the promise of meeting the boys on the edge of the timber, which was in plain sight several miles away.

It was understood that the younger members were to enter this cover from the south, about the same time that their parents approached from the opposite direction. Since the antelope frequents the plains or open country, and since indications of them had been observed, the elder folks hoped to drive a number into the timber where the boys could secure several shots.

The afternoon was well advanced when Owen and Frank reached the edge of this timber, where the ground was so spongy that they plainly saw the footprints made a short time before. After Owen had scrutinized them for several minutes from the

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back of his pony, he turned to his cousin with the remarks already given.

Confident in the prospect of game being near, the youths had surveyed the timber with much interest while approaching it. As nearly as they could judge, it was five or six acres in extent and abounded with rocks, bowlders and undergrowth, so that, though it was comparatively narrow, they were unable to see through it to the hilly country beyond, from which their parents were supposed to be riding.

Forcing their tough ponies among the trees as far as they could penetrate with comfort, the boys slipped out of their saddles to the ground. They did not tie the horses, for they were so well trained that they would not wander off, and, unless some unusual cause should disturb them, they would be found quietly grazing near the spot where their owners chose to leave them.

"There's one thing that gives me some uneasiness," said Frank, as they carefully picked their way toward the other side of the wood.

"What's that?"

"You know this land is claimed by the Ute Indians, and they are among the worst tribes in the West. We are right on their preserves, so to speak."

"How can that be when we haven't met one?"

"You and I know well enough that because an Indian isn't visible, it is no proof that he isn't near. I didn't say anything when you proposed this forenoon that we should separate, but all the same, it struck me as an unwise thing to do."

"It may not have been the height of prudence, but what's the odds?" said Owen; "the chances are a hundred to one that there isn't any danger from the Utes, and, if nothing happens, we shall be among the ranches and cattlemen by to-morrow night, where we shall be as safe as if in St. Louis."

The other said nothing, and the light spirits of his cousin were so contagious that he felt half ashamed of his own fears. They were so close to the other side of the belt of timber, that they could discern plainly what was beyond. They, therefore, stopped and sat down on a bowlder, with the intention of waiting an hour or so to see whether their parents would be able to drive any game within reach of their rifles.

Northward, from where they sat, the country gradually sloped upward until at the distance of an eighth of a mile it culminated in a ridge two or three hundred feet high. Beyond that it descended so that the ridge marked the limit of the vision in that direction.

This ridge and the plain spread out before their view were devoid of trees, but covered with a sparse growth of grass, somewhat dried by drought, but still able to give a living nourishment to the elk, deer, buffalo and other grazing animals that were without other means of sustenance.

"Hello!" exclaimed Frank, within ten minutes after they took a seat, "yonder is one of the animals."

On the crest of the ridge a noble buck walked to view, his figure thrown in relief against the clear sky beyond. When first seen, he stood in a line with the boys, as though walking directly toward them, when a suspicion of something amiss caused him to stop. He seemed to be looking at the very bowlder on which Owen and Frank sat motionless, and peering through the undergrowth in front.

"Do you suppose he sees us?" asked Owen in a whisper.

"No."

"Then he must scent us."

"That is impossible, for what little wind is blowing is directly across the space between us, so that the scent cannot be carried to him."

"What, then, is the matter?"

"Nothing; it is only the cautious habits of the animal, which lead him to be always on the lookout for danger."

"He seems to be alone."

"So he is; he is some old buck that has been driven out of his herd by a younger rival, and the fellow has nothing to do but to browse for a living, look out for dahger, and wander about forsaken and lonely until, when he becomes too old to take care of himself any longer, he will fall a victim to the wolves."

Having stood with his head and shoulders up, as though posing for a picture—and a splendid subject he was—the buck wheeled about and vanished like a flash.

"Here comes our chance!" exclaimed Frank in an undertone, throwing himself behind the bowlder, his companion being quick to do the same.

Straight over the ridge and almost on the very spot where the buck had been standing a few minutes before, trotted a large and beautiful doe, with her family stringing along at her heels. They formed a striking picture as they arose to view, one after the other, on the crest of the ridge, and came down at a leisurely pace toward the belt of timber in which the young hunters had hidden themselves and were watching them.

At the rear trotted a fine-looking buck—the commander-in-chief of the little army. It is the custom of the antelopes and of many other animals, when traveling, to place their strongest members in the rear.

The reason for this is plain. The peril to those creatures comes from the wolves that follow their trail, and always make their attacks from behind, which, is, therefore, the point of danger.

A doe invariably leads a family or herd of antelopes, and a cow does the same with a company of elks. This is probably because the females or mothers will never, except in cases of imminent danger, run faster than the calves or fawns can follow. The female leader picks out the feeding-ground, chooses the trail to be followed, leads the flight when danger appears, and cuts out the pace to be traveled.

"There are eleven," whispered Owen, as the buck, rising against the azure background, came trotting down the slope at the rear of the rest; "and what a beautiful sight!"

"I wonder whether they will enter the wood? It looks as if they had been scared by something, and will do so for refuge; but we have heard nothing of the guns of father and uncle."

"They may want to give us all the shooting."

"They are hardly considerate enough for that," said Frank, with a laugh; "besides, eleven animals are enough to afford all a chance."

"Hello! what's up now?"

"Something has scared them."

CHAPTER II.

AN ALARMING SIGHT.

The antelope family were trotting along in their easy, graceful fashion, when the buck at the rear suddenly increased his pace, and running to the front of the does and fawns, rounded them up. They huddled together, frightened, but obedient as a family always ought to be to its head.

"They're within range," whispered Frank, "and we've got them; I'll take the buck and you the doe."

"All right," whispered his cousin.

The group had stood but a minute, when it was plain that the doe wished to continue her flight, while the buck was determined that she should not, until he found out the cause for alarm.

The doe made a start, but the buck, which was the fleetest of

the band, stopped her. She stood a moment, and then started again, but as before, he turned her back, and stamped his fore-foot to show that he was angry. Instead of heeding the lesson, she made another break, whereupon he bucked her fiercely, driving her clear through the group to the rear.

"Such ungallantry ought to be punished," said Frank, pulling the trigger, and dropping him in his tracks.

At the same moment Owen let fly, and the doe came down. The rest were thrown into a panic, and wheeling to the right, with a flutter of white tails, took a course parallel to the ridge, turning after a flight of several hundred yards, and disappearing over the elevation.

Shortly after the reports of guns were heard, apparently a quarter of a mile to the northward.

"Father and uncle are getting in their work," remarked Owen; "we are not likely to go hungry to-night."

Following the good custom of the frontier, the boys reloaded their pieces before venturing from cover, and then walked out on the open plain where the two prostrate forms lay.

"Both are plump and in good condition," said Frank; "but I think the doe is the most tender."

With the aid of their keen hunting-knives they cut a choice slice from the quarters of the female, and carried it back to the wood, where a fire was quickly started and preparations made to broil it, there being enough meat for all four. The boys expected that their parents would soon join them, and probably would go into camp for the night in the timber.

The timber offered an excellent camping site. A small stream of water wound through one portion, affording all that the boys and their animals needed. The meat was carefully washed, and was soon broiling in true hunter-fashion before the hot blaze. The life that the boys led gave them the most vigorous of appetites, and they did not wait until the steak was done to a turn before falling to and eating their fill.

A half hour had now passed and they began to wonder what delayed their friends.

"I haven't heard anything more of their guns," said Owen, who in spite of the good spirits of his companion, could not free himself from a certain misgiving that something was amiss.

"It may be that they have brought down some of the animals and have prepared a meal for us," said Frank.

"But the understanding was that they should join us in the timber here."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Frank, showing more interest than at any time since they left their friends.

"Certainly I am; don't you remember that your father said, at the moment of riding away, they would not keep us waiting long before they would be with us in the wood?"

"I remember it now, but it had slipped my mind until this moment; that is strange."

Frank took but one or two more mouthfuls, when he arose to his feet, saying:

"Wait here, Owen, till I come back."

"Where are you going?"

"To the top of the ridge to take a look for them."

"Don't stay long, for at this rate we shall soon all be scattered."

"Oh, I am not going far," called Frank, with something of his old cheerfulness; "you spend the time at dinner until I come back."

"I've got all I want," remarked Owen, whose lack of appetite was not due alone to the fact that he had eaten heartily, but to the alarm caused by the manner of his companion.

Rifle in hand, Frank Woodward pushed through the timber, and stepping out on the open plain, ran every step of the way to

the top of the ridge, on which the antelope had first appeared. It can hardly be said that he was scared, but he was uneasy. He recalled the facts about the Utes, and knew he and his companion were in a dangerous situation. Although the party had not been disturbed by the red men, there could be no doubt they were hostile, and, if a number of them should discover the hunters, they would doubtless attack them, so that while the whites were hunting the antelope, a more dangerous foe would be hunting the whites.

Reaching the crest of the ridge, the youth cast an anxious look beyond.

Though Frank failed to look upon such an extensive area as he had hoped, he still saw a great deal; but the bright, keen eyes that swept across the long, winding valley and up the slope beyond, failed to detect the first evidence of animal life. Not only did he see nothing of any horseman, but the antelope were gone.

Now, for the first time, the young man felt a pang of genuine fear. He could not doubt that there had been a slip somewhere in the programme of the elder members of the party.

The most puzzling question that presented itself to him was as to who had fired the rifle shots from the valley, which he and Owen heard a short time before, and which at that time they did not dream could have been caused by any one except the elder members of their own company.

But there was nothing for him to do, and, with a heavy heart, he turned about and began walking down the slope toward the timber where he had parted from Owen but a brief while before.

Casting his glance in that direction, he saw him standing on the edge of the plain, and watching him with no little anxiety.

"Did you see them?" called Owen, across the space.

Frank shook his head by way of reply, and Owen, instead of waiting, started on a run up the slope.

Frank had not passed more than one-fourth of the space, when he paused and awaited the coming of his cousin, asking:

"Why do you come here when we were to meet them in the wood?"

"There's no use of talking," replied Owen, compressing his lips, "something is wrong."

"I am not ready to say that, though I cannot understand where father and uncle are. They are mounted on faster horses than ours, and they had very little further to travel, so they ought to have joined us long ago."

"How do you explain that they did not?"

"I think they have chased the antelope over the ridge yonder, and have been led further off than they suspected."

Owen shook his head; the explanation did not satisfy him.

"Let's go to the top of the ridge again and wait a while. The sun is an hour above the horizon, and we may as well stay there as in the timber."

Frank could offer no objection to the proposition, and the cousins turned about and walked to the top of the elevation, where they cast their eyes over the stretch of country which I have already described.

This time, however, they saw a sight which was anything but pleasant. A third of a mile to the west six or eight horsemen were in plain view. They had ridden over the second ridge and were crossing the valley in a diagonal direction, their course such that, if not changed, they would come up the next ridge within a hundred feet of where the boys were standing at that very moment.

These horsemen were Indians, and beyond question they belonged to the Ute tribe. They were galloping at a leisurely pace, but it would not take them long to reach the spot where the cousins stood in alarm, looking down upon them.

Since the red men were in such plain sight of the youths, it fol-

lowed that the latter were equally exposed to their gaze. In fact, they were more conspicuous, as is always the case with those who stand on the mountain top, and are compared with those in the valley below.

If the cousins had felt any doubt as to whether the Utes saw them, it vanished a minute later, when the warriors uttered their resounding cries, and, spurring their horses into a swift gallop, headed toward them.

"It strikes me," said Frank, arousing from his amazement, "that the best thing we can do is to emigrate from these parts."

"There ain't any question about that," added Owen, as he turned on his heel and joined in a swift run down the slope for the timber, which they ought not to have left.

CHAPTER III.

A RUN FOR LIFE.

The youths had a good start and were fleet of foot. It need not be said that they did not let the grass grow under their feet.

They knew they were running for life, and they darted down the slope at a speed never surpassed before, dashing in among the trees, boulders and undergrowth at a reckless pace, and making straight for their ponies, on which, as may be said, their fate rested.

Quick as were the lads, the Ute warriors, mounted on their fleet animals, were quicker. Before the fugitives could reach the cover of the timber, the Indians appeared on the ridge and galloped down the slope at headlong rate, shouting and whooping like so many wild men, as indeed they were.

It can be seen in what a bad plight the boys would have found themselves had their own animals gone astray, but providentially they were where they were left, quietly cropping what little grass could be found among the trees, and nibbling the more tender herbage of the undergrowth, their saddles and accoutrements in place, and everything in readiness for duty.

Only a few steps were required to lead them to the open prairie on the other side, where they had entered some time before. Vaulting into their saddles, their riders wheeled about and spurred them into a dead run.

Fully one-fourth of a mile separated them from their pursuers, and, so far as could be seen, there was nothing in front to prevent a fair race.

The boys rode close together, frequently glancing over their shoulders at the wild-looking party speeding after them.

"Everything depends on our horses," said Frank; "if they are better mounted than we, the game is up."

"We may find some place where we can make a stand. There are not so many of them that we ought not to hold our own."

"Ah, if they were only with us," said Frank, thinking of his father and uncle, "we wouldn't be in such a hurry to get away."

The flight had lasted hardly ten minutes when an alarming fact was too evident to be doubted; the Utes were gaining, and, if the race should continue without interruption, they must inevitably overhaul the fugitives.

The animals ridden by the red men were probably no better than those of the boys, all belonging to the tough breed of ponies that are so popular on the plains, but their superior fleetness on the present occasion was probably due to their freshness. Frank and Owen had done a great deal of riding that day—far more than usual—and when they dismounted on the edge of the timber their beasts were in sore need of rest. They had been given a halt for little more than an hour, but it was not enough to place them on anything like equal terms with their pursuers.

At the end of half an hour the space between the Indians and

the boys had been lessened one-half, and the Utes pushed the pursuit with remorseless perseverance. Now and then they emitted their sharp war-whoops, which were enough to startle the bravest men when heard under similar circumstances.

Suddenly a couple of the Indians discharged their rifles. The bullets sped wide of the mark, but it cannot be said that that fact afforded any comfort to the fugitives, who would have given all at their command had their ponies been as fresh as those of their enemies.

By this time the sun was in the horizon, and night was near. The boys recalled that, although there was no moon until near midnight, yet the sky was so clear and studded with stars that nothing was to be hoped from the gathering darkness. The Utes were so close that, even could the chase be prolonged for an hour or two, they could press it to a conclusion as well as when the sun was in the zenith.

Frank made a discovery that he had not suspected up to the present time, since no occasion had arisen for disclosing the fact. The horse ridden by his cousin was considerably fleetlier than his own. He forged ahead several times, and he noticed Owen restrained his speed. No matter how great the peril threatening the boys, it could not be imminent enough to lead one to desert the other.

The cousins rarely spoke. There was no call for words, since each realized his danger and knew there was but one thing to do, urge their distressed ponies to their utmost until they should give out from exhaustion.

It was not long before one of the pursuers again fired his gun. Frank heard distinctly the ping of the bullet as it almost nipped his ear. Turning as best he could in the saddle, and without checking his steed, he brought his own rifle to his shoulder and fired at the foremost Ute, who, having drawn ahead from the others, was alarmingly close.

Probably once in a hundred times such a shot as that of Frank Woodward would do execution, and it so happened that this was the fortunate exception.

The bullet sent aimlessly from his rifle passed through the brain of the nearest horse of the Utes. The animal, with a whinney, half reared and plunged forward with his nose plowing the ground, his rider having had an exceedingly narrow escape himself, going over his head as if propelled from a catapult.

The other red men did not stop. Leaving their dismounted leader to take care of himself as best he could, they dashed after the fugitives, upon whom they continued to gain with fearful certainty and steadiness.

All of the Utes were within easy gunshot of the boys, whom they evidently wished to take captive, for though they had fired several shots it did not appear—except, perhaps, in the one instance—that they really sought to harm them.

They now began dropping shots again. They were not only fair marksmen, but were in better form to do execution than were the lads, inasmuch as they were not obliged to turn on their horses to take aim. It looked as if they were purposely firing over the heads of the fugitives, as an officer sometimes does when he wishes to frighten a fleeing criminal into surrender.

If such were the fact, there was one among the Utes who held a different purpose, as was soon evident.

He it was who, through the fall of the leader, became himself the foremost.

Bringing his gun to a level, he aimed at the pony ridden by Frank. Although it was growing dark, the distance was so short that he readily made his aim certain. At that critical moment, the distressed horse drew his head slightly to one side, and the Ute

der of his rider, who was leaning forward, and into the head of the flying steed.

The result, while similar to, was different in one respect from that of the Indian's horse, shot down only a minute before. It was merciful that the faithful pony found such quick release from his distress, but instead of making a plunging fall, he reeled to one side.

This apprised Frank of the approaching catastrophe, and gave him a few seconds in which to prepare himself. Withdrawing his feet from the stirrups, he waited only until the animal began sinking. He went down easily, and then, with remarkable dexterity, the rider leaped clear, and, landing on his feet, ran with his utmost speed several yards without stumbling.

Owen had been as quick as his cousin to notice the inferiority of the animal at his side.

In fact, Owen believed that if he had been alone, he could have held his own, and possibly ran away from his pursuers. But it need not be said that he did not dream for a single instant of doing anything of the kind, while Frank would have acted precisely the same had their situations been reversed.

Seeing that Frank was sure to be on the ground in a minute or so, Owen pulled his pony toward him and slackened his speed, so that, when the dismounted youth was running, it was close behind the other animal.

"Quick! give me your hand!" called Owen, leaning over his saddle, and offering his right hand, while he held the reins and his gun in his left.

Frank obeyed. The distance was not far to the back of the pony, and, with the assistance of his friend, he landed astride the steed directly behind the saddle, without bringing him to a halt.

It was a daring deed, and an exploit which could have been accomplished only by a skillful rider. The cousins were expert horsemen, though Owen was a native of New York, where he had spent his life until this visit to the West.

Frank was scooped on the fly, as may be said, and the instant he felt the pony under him, he called out:

"I'm all right! Now, if there is any go in that horse of yours, he couldn't have a better time to prove it."

The animal was toiling desperately. He seemed to feel that the salvation of the two boys on his back depended solely upon him, and he did not spare himself.

He had moderated his pace somewhat in order to permit the young athlete to make his flying leap upon his back, and hardly was the additional weight added, when he showed a burst of swift speed which caused the blood of the riders to tingle with hope.

Frank glanced backward, and could hardly avoid a shout as he saw unmistakably that they were drawing away from their dusky pursuers.

The cousins would have been only too glad to give the Utes another shot or two, but circumstances forbade; they must be saved through the single horse, or not saved at all.

But there is a limit to the ability of animal and man. The pony had done his duty in a manner beyond all praise, but in reality when he undertook to outrun the Indians' animals, he essayed that which was impossible.

"It's no use," said Frank to his companion; "we may as well stop and give ourselves up."

"Not yet," replied Owen, in a voice which showed that some extraordinary cause kept hope burning in his heart.

CHAPTER IV.

A STRANGE REFUGE.

At the moment Frank Woodward's heart was sinking with utter despair, it was suddenly thrilled with hope by the sight of a structure, known in the West as a "dugout."

These are made by excavating the earth, as if for a cellar of a building. The wooden walls, which rise a few feet above the level of the surrounding plain, are banked with sod and earth to a depth of several feet. The roof may be of logs, with or without a layer of earth, while at one end the chimney hardly protrudes, the whole arrangement looking like an ordinary bank of ground or a large hummock. The common country icehouse bears some resemblance to the dugout of the West.

It was the sight of such a building that awakened hope in the heart of Owen Woodward.

It was fortunate, too, that the intervening elevation shut it from sight until, as may be said, they were almost upon it. Had the pursuing Utes descried it a moment sooner, they would have tumbled both the lads from the horse; but the same causes which screened the shelter from the fugitives, shut it out from the sight of the Indians for a precious second or two longer.

The sight of the haven of refuge aroused the daring Frank, who almost forgot himself in the terrible excitement of the moment.

"Don't stop, Owen!" he said, peering over the shoulder of his friend; "charge right through the door!"

Some such wild thought had flashed upon Owen an instant before. It seemed more than likely that the heavy door was fastened from within, and there was no time to knock for admittance, for the Indians were on their heels. The short delay necessary to throw open the door, supposing the summons was answered on the instant (which was not probable by any means), would give the Utes all the time they wanted to capture or shoot down the lads.

It would be death to the skurrying pony to plunge against the door, and while the momentum of the animal and his riders was sure to sweep it from its hinges, it was impossible for the lads to escape serious bruises and injury, with very little risk of having their necks broken.

Nevertheless, Owen Woodward determined to take the fearful risk, for the situation was too desperate for any halfway measures.

But fortunately for our young friends, circumstances forbade the carrying out of this mad purpose.

Owen had hardly formed the decision, when to his dismay, he perceived he was not approaching the front of the house; no door was in sight.

It became necessary, therefore, to make an abrupt change in the line of flight, and to do that, he must slacken his tremendous pace.

In other words, it had become necessary to search for the entrance to the subterranean house. Both boys were wise enough to understand that when the pony was pulled down to a slower gait, he would refuse to make the dash they had determined upon. It was only when under the excitement of a dead run that he could be forced to drive his head against a solid wall.

All these and many more thoughts shot through the minds of the boys in a hundredth part of the time it has taken us to tell it.

With the Utes frightfully near, Owen jerked the rein of his pony so as to bring his head around the corner of the structure, while both lads peered forward in search of the door.

The instant they did so they caught sight of it.

"There it is!" exclaimed Frank, slipping nimbly from his seat, while his cousin was but a second behind him. Neither paid any attention to the horse, which moved off at a deliberate pace.

A couple of leaps carried Frank to the entrance. He raised his hand to give a resounding knock, when he perceived the latch-string hanging out. A quick yank of this, a pressure, and the door swung open.

"Thank Heaven!" gasped Owen, darting in after him.

In a twinkling the door was reclosed and the latch-string drawn in, everything being done with such rapidity that the boys themselves hardly realized what had taken place.

The transition from the light, even though quite faint, of the outside, rendered the interior for a minute or two utterly dark, and the only way of determining their surroundings was by the sense of feeling.

Frank, who had more knowledge of the West than his cousin, was well aware that the simple wooden latch which was raised by means of the leathern string, was not strong enough to resist the pressure that their enemies were sure to exert against it.

He therefore moved his hand along the sides of the door in search of a heavy wooden bolt, which, when placed in position, rendered the entrance almost impregnable.

Fortunately his knowledge of the peculiar structures enabled him to place his hand on it at once, and he instantly dropped it in place across the door, the two ends being secured in flat, heavy iron hooks.

Rapid as were the movements of the lad, he was not a second too soon. Indeed, had there been any obstruction to cause the slightest delay, it would have been fatal; but wonderful good fortune had attended every movement of the youths thus far.

Bang! One of the Utes, leaping from his pony, flung himself sideways against the door with a force that seemed to threaten to drive it halfway across the interior of the building; but luckily it held its place.

Bang, bang! the charge was repeated, as though a battering-ram were pounding against the structure; and the boys held their breath.

"The man who built this place must have feared something of this kind," said Owen, with a sigh of relief.

"I don't know about that. Hark!"

The Indians were shouting, screeching, firing their rifles, and galloping around the dugout. The ping of their bullets against the massive door was plainly heard, the sounds being peculiarly suggestive of the peril which it seemed had been postponed instead of averted.

It being evident that no immediate harm could be done, the boys consumed several minutes in acquainting themselves with the peculiarities of their refuge.

When Frank turned his head, he observed that a few embers were burning at the opposite end from the door.

But for this, they would have been in such darkness that their eyes would have been of little help; for when the door was closed, even at midday, a dim twilight filled the room, and now that night was closing in the gloom was more profound.

Moving to where the embers lay, Frank stooped down and stirred them until they broke into a crackling blaze, which filled the room with a crimson glow, that brought everything out in full relief.

It was then seen that the dugout consisted of a single apartment, about eighteen feet long and half as wide. The walls were made of heavy logs, and the roof of the same material, the latter sloping so slightly that the middle of the room was not more than a foot higher than the sides.

The furniture of this primitive structure was of the simplest character. There were two stools, a bench, a couple of buffalo robes in a corner, several cups and cooking utensils, a small stand or table, a dry-goods box (whose use could not be guessed at, if

it had any use), a pail partly filled with water, and half of an antelope steak.

The conclusion Frank arrived at was that the dugout belonged to a party of cattlemen, who were absent looking after their herd. They might be a dozen miles distant, with no intention of returning, or they might be near at hand, on their way home.

The dugout contained a single window on one of the sides, that being the only opening, besides the door. The construction of this window showed the same wisdom which led the builders to give all the strength possible to the walls and roof of the place. It was less than a foot in extent each way, and was filled with a single pane of glass, that had been brought from some point eastward. The thickness of the logs and the depth of the overlying sods gave the arrangement the appearance of a tunnel, for it was fully three feet from the window pane to the end of the opening outside.

The fireplace was made of stone arched with considerable skill, and leading, by means of a chimney, to the opening in the roof, through which the smoke of the fire found vent. At certain seasons, this tiny column of vapor, creeping lazily upward, was the only means of locating the shelter of the cattlemen or settlers of the place.

"Well," said Frank, at the conclusion of his investigation, "this is a strange business and no mistake."

"What more fortunate shelter could we have found?" asked Owen, whose eyes had been equally busy. "We are safe for a time, though we cannot say for how long."

"There is water," observed Frank, with a smile, pointing to the pail.

"And food," added his cousin, indicating the steak on the stand; "so we shall be able to undergo a siege of several days."

"Providing the Utes don't find some way of smoking us out."

"We are safe against that," added Owen, accepting the literal construction of the remark, "for the Indians can't muster enough fire to burn this structure, which looks as incombustible as if made wholly of stone."

CHAPTER V.

WARM WORK.

The information about the interior of the dugout which proved such a timely refuge to the young cousins, was gathered during the first hour spent within the structure. The Utes on the outside kept their attention too much engaged to permit the investigation to go on uninterruptedly.

The galloping, howling and firing lasted without intermission for the better part of an hour, during which the lads could only cower within, and wonder and speculate as to what was to be the end of the strange siege. The thud, thud of the bullets against the massive door told clearly what would be the result if either of the defenders showed his face there.

Suddenly there came a jingle and crash of glass, the fragments flying about the room and over the persons of the youths. The Utes had poured a volley through the single window pane.

"That helps ventilation!" remarked Frank, whose rescue from capture and death was so striking that he could not feel oppressed by the fierceness of the attack.

"It will help it more if they stave the door in," added Owen, less cool and hopeful than his companion.

"I haven't much fear of that, unless they are left alone for several days to work their own sweet will."

"I don't see what is to prevent them having all the time they want, for there is no force strong enough in this part of the country to give us help."

"We can't be certain of that, though it won't do to count upon it. There ought to be United States cavalry somewhere within call, if we only knew where to look for them."

"And were able to make the hunt, but it's mighty little show we will get while cramped up here."

"Meanwhile, let's take a drink."

Frank lifted the pail from where it sat on the floor, and holding it to his lips, took several swallows.

"It's not very fresh," he remarked, smacking his lips and setting it down, "but it's a good deal better than no water at all."

"We must be sparing of our supplies," added Frank, looking at the partly eaten haunch of antelope, "for you know that when a fort is besieged, the garrison put themselves on short allowance."

"How long can we hold out, Frank?"

"If you mean how long the food and water should last us, I would say we ought to be able to stand it very well for a week, but I don't believe we are in for any such a siege as that."

"Why not?"

"The American Indian can be patient, but a party of Ute warriors wouldn't content themselves that long, for the sake of getting possession of a couple of youngsters that ain't of much account."

Owen shrugged his shoulders and looked significantly at the door.

"I can't say at present, but I have always understood that the Indians are wonderfully ingenious, and will find ways of circumventing the most cunning of foes. I don't think they can burn or smoke us out, and these logs are so heavy and locked so strongly together at the ends that they can't get them apart——"

Frank raised his hand for the other to hold his peace. In the stillness of the apartment both detected a slight noise—so slight at first that it was impossible to locate it. Then Owen pointed at the shattered window pane. It was there.

Meanwhile, night had fully descended, and all was dark on the outside. The embers on the rude hearth, which had been stirred into a small blaze that illuminated the interior, had been allowed to smolder again, for the glow gave the Utes the advantage of seeing the youths whenever they passed in front of the opening.

For a minute or two it was hard to tell the meaning of the peculiar rustling at the window, which would not have been noticed had not the youths been on the alert.

Winchester in hand, Frank Woodward tiptoed to the opening and peered stealthily out. There was just enough starlight for him to discover, after a few minutes careful investigation, that one of the Utes had forced his body through the tunnel, and was at that moment close to the shattered window pane.

He must have been an unusually slim warrior, though the passage was slightly larger than the opening in the logs, into which the glass had been fitted.

Frank whispered the explanation to Owen, and told him to keep back and out of range. The lad obeyed, though his curiosity was as tense as his cousin's.

It was a piece of daring on the part of the Indian, for he could not have failed to know the frightful peril he ran, and Frank was astonished.

It was evident the Ute was investigating. Not fully apprised of the construction of the window, he must have hoped that, if the passage was broad enough to admit his body, the window itself was likely to do the same; but it was a piece of courage on his part amounting to desperate recklessness, which cost him dear.

Frank waited only long enough to understand thoroughly the situation, when he brought his Winchester to a level and drove a bullet into the dusky crown which extinguished life as suddenly as a bolt of lightning.

"There's no use of fooling," he muttered, with compressed lips; "they are after our lives, and it won't do to show any weakness."

The sharp crack of the rifle, and the gasping shriek of the miserable redskin, apprised his companions of what had taken place. They answered with a series of resounding howls, and then for several minutes profound stillness reigned.

Owen crept stealthily to the side of Frank, who was all ears and eyes.

"Sh!" whispered the latter, "there'll be more of them pretty soon."

His belief was that the other Utes would not allow their dead comrade to remain in the passage. The sepulcher was altogether too undignified to suit the ideas of the red men.

But the terrible lesson was not lost on the besiegers. They had learned that the lads were vigilant, and that any exposure to their marksmanship was sure to be followed by serious consequences.

The inanimate body so blocked the passage that it was impossible to see clearly, but by and by a sound quite similar to that which had first awakened suspicion was detected.

Frank knew what it meant on the instant. One or more warriors had seized the feet of their dead comrade, and were carefully drawing him out. Nothing could be seen of them, but more than likely they were within range, and the lad was eager for another shot.

Still he wished the frightful obstruction removed. He could not bear when the light of morning dawned over the prairie to look upon the victim of his watchfulness.

He waited until convinced that the form had been withdrawn so far that those on the outside could retain their grasp upon the feet without exposing themselves to too much danger. Then thrusting the muzzle of his weapon through the shattered window pane, he fired twice in quick succession.

But the result was not what he hoped. The American Indian invariably utters a shriek or yell when mortally smitten, but nothing of the kind greeted his shots.

The withdrawal of the form, however, ceased, only to be renewed a minute later; for, as the youth anticipated, those engaged in the work were able to shelter their bodies against any shot from the interior of the dugout.

Frank did not fire again, for he knew it was useless. All at once the faint starlight was observed on the outside. The body was safely withdrawn, and the first real incident of the extraordinary siege was at an end.

There can be no questioning the wisdom of the severe proceeding of Frank Woodward.

Any chivalry on his part toward a foe at his mercy would have been accepted as weakness, and instead of restraining the enmity of the Utes, would have encouraged it. They were determined to make prisoners of the two boys, who had fought so gallantly for their lives; and, if it should become apparent that such capture was beyond their power, they would be quick to riddle their bodies with bullets.

Everything now indicated that our friends were in for a regular siege. There could be nothing but conjecture as to the period it would last, but there was no question that it would continue at least until daylight.

Although there seemed no way possible for the Utes to effect an entrance, yet the cousins were too prudent to count upon such an impossibility to the extent of both going to sleep at the same time.

"I will keep watch until one o'clock," said Frank, "and then, if you wish it, I will wake you and we will trade places."

"That is well enough, and I suppose the arrangement is a good

one; but the difficulty with it is, that I am not able to sleep a wink before that hour."

"I think you are mistaken."

"I know I am not. You know when we were in camp with father and uncle last night, we slept straight through till the sun arose, and I don't feel the need, therefore, of slumber. Besides, things have been moving at such a lively pace around here that I would have to be a good deal sleepier than I am to keep my eyes shut."

"In that case we will both sit up till one becomes drowsy. I will give the sticks on the hearth a little stir, so that we won't be in entire darkness."

He moved across the apartment, and bending down as at first, stirred the embers until they responded with a little twist of flame, which enabled them to see each other's face. Then Frank straightened up, and was in the act of speaking, when Owen called out in sudden excitement:

"Jump quick, or you'll be shot!"

The athletic youth made a sudden leap to one side, which was at the same instant that there was a flash at the broken window, and the report in the close room made their ears tingle.

Despite the shooting of one of the Utes at that place a moment before, another had crawled into the same perilous place and fired his rifle at the figure of the youth at the moment it was outlined against the faint crimson background created by the stirring of the embers on the hearth.

CHAPTER VI.

A STRANGE CONCLUSION.

Frank Woodward could not have had a closer call, for, had his dexterous leap been taken an instant later, he would have been pierced by the bullet, which was well aimed.

The Ute, aware of his danger, was working desperately to back out of the passage, but Owen Woodward was too quick for him. Dashing to the window, he shoved the muzzle of his gun almost against the shoulders of the warrior, and in the fury of the moment, discharged his Winchester three times in succession.

Once would have been all sufficient, for the body that was hastily dragged forth by his companions, could not have been more limp and devoid of life.

"I wonder if the fools will try that again?" said Frank, coming to his side; "they are more reckless than I dreamed they could be."

He stepped, softly to the side of the structure, and pressed his ear against it.

For several minutes not the slightest sound rewarded his attention. Then he fancied he could catch the faint noise made by moccasins moving about the entrance.

Despite the massiveness of the structure, it was extremely sensitive in a certain sense, for, while his ear rested against it, he distinctly felt it move inward.

True, the motion may be described as no more than a hair's breadth, but it was as unmistakable as if several inches in extent.

"They are pressing the door," he whispered to Owen, who had taken his place near him.

"What for?"

"I can't form an idea, but there is no danger of any of them going to sleep to-night."

One of the most impressive features of the siege of the Utes was the profound silence which followed their occasional outbursts of yells and shouts. So long as the outcries lasted, it seemed as if nothing else was afoot. The boys could tell what they were doing, and it was not of a nature to alarm them; but

when they were still, the imagination was free to conjure up all sorts of wild fancies, while nothing could be truer than the remark of Owen concerning the remarkable ingenuity of the red men.

The pressure on the outside of the door was repeated at intervals with such regularity, that to the boys it resembled the respiration of some monster whose ribs they could feel. The only explanation which occurred to them was that the Utes were testing the strength of the structure, with a hope that the defenders might have neglected some precaution in guarding it against such a demonstration as they had in mind.

But it was inconceivable that Frank and Owen should neglect the most obvious point of danger, and the essay was abandoned after a time.

Had there been any heavy timbers at command, the boys would have had grave cause for fear, for many a time in the history of the frontier has a powerful door been driven inward by the use of a log or heavy piece of timber employed as a battering-ram, and jammed against the structure with a force which was repeated again and again until it became resistless.

But, fortunately for our friends, they knew that the appliance was wanting. They were in the middle of an open plain, covered with sparsely growing grass, with no trees nearer than the grove where they had hunted the antelope that afternoon.

It must have cost the builders of the dugout a great deal of pains and labor to bring the material such a distance, but the wisdom of their work was now manifest.

Ten minutes after Frank's move to the structure the pressure from the outside ceased, and the solid walls of the dugout were not more motionless than the door itself.

Unable to decide the full meaning of the demonstration, both Frank and Owen were uneasy over the fact that it might signify much more than they suspected.

Once more Frank approached the window and listened. All was silent there and the conclusion was warranted that the Utes would give it a wide berth thereafter.

Frank's next move was to the chimney. He first made sure that none of the watchful foes without could catch sight of him, for a second risk like the first was sure to prove fatal. The fire had again smoldered so low that only his shadowy figure was observable when directly in front of it.

To his dismay, he had hardly reached the spot when he heard a disturbance which proved the Indians were giving attention to that place.

He whispered to Owen to join him, and asked the meaning of the slight noise perceptible to both.

"They are taking the chimney down," was the alarming conclusion; "when that is done, they will have an opening through which they can drive a team of horses."

"Impossible!"

"Wait and we shall see!"

In fact, they could do nothing but wait, with the resolve that the moment the first glimpse of starlight shone through an opening, they would begin a fusillade which could not fail to produce fearful results.

But if Owen had rightly divined the intentions of the Indians, there was little hope left for the defenders.

The tearing away of the chimney would leave the whole interior of the dugout exposed, and the Utes could pour in a volley from which it would be out of the power of the lads to screen themselves.

The chimney, as has been already explained, was built mostly of stone, and while it narrowed as it approached the roof, the base was the breadth of the building; so that could it be taken out of the way, a clear sweep would be given of the apartment.

Frank could not feel certain that his cousin was right in his conclusion, for the task seemed too difficult of accomplishment by the Indians without the aid of numerous implements besides their knives.

The chimney was not only composed of large stones, which must have been gathered with great difficulty, but a species of clay had been used to fill the interstices, and this substance, under the baking of the fire and the elements, had acquired a hardness like that seen in the adobe structures of the Mexicans.

But that the Utes were engaged in doing something to the chimney was too manifest to admit of question.

The boys refilled their magazines with cartridges, and—as calmly as they could—awaited the development of events.

Another surprise awaited them. The suspicious noises at that end of the building ceased without any apparent cause.

The youths approached as closely as they could; but ten, fifteen minutes, and longer passed, without the slightest sound to indicate that anything was on foot.

The most studied listening at the window and the door was equally fruitless. The stillness of the tomb could not have been more profound.

"It would be curious now if they had given up and gone off," said Frank, in tones which showed he hardly believed the supposition possible.

"They might withdraw some distance in the hope of making us believe they have gone altogether, but I don't believe there is any party of Indians in the world that would give up in that fashion."

"Nor do I think so, either; but— What time does the moon rise, Owen?" asked Frank, with startling abruptness.

"Not until near midnight. Why do you ask?"

"I have a reason: It must be pretty dark outside."

"We can tell that by looking through the window; I caught the twinkle of a few stars, but it was hardly possible to get a glimpse of the warrior, when he was close enough for me to push the end of my rifle against him."

"My belief is this: the Utes have fallen back a short distance with the purpose of tempting us out, but they don't believe we are foolish enough to try it. All the same, I'm going to try it!"

Frank could not see the face of his cousin, but he could picture the expression of consternation that overspread it at this amazing announcement. He heard him recoil a step, and he knew he was staring at him, doubtful whether he had heard aright.

"Are you crazy, Frank?"

"I hope not."

"Tell me then what you mean by such words?"

"Perhaps I am reckless and foolish; but I say to you, Owen, that if we don't get out of here before many hours, we never will."

"I see no reason for such belief."

"You have learned enough during this afternoon and evening to know that we have got a party of the bravest and most skillful Indians in America to fight against. I don't believe Geronimo and his Apaches would take such risks as those two did that crawled up in front of that window. Then they have tried the door, and have got some plan against the chimney. I can't be sure what it is, but I believe they will succeed."

"What then do you propose?"

"That we steal out of the front door—provided, of course, we find the way clear—and get far enough off, before the moon rises, to give them the slip."

"Why, Frank, have you lost your head? I cannot think of a wilder scheme than that."

"It may seem so to you, but to me it is the course of wisdom. The Utes will not be expecting it——"

"Why, then, have they taken the pains to set the trap?"

"With the hope that we may try it after a while; the scheme will stand some chance, therefore, of success, if we take it up before they believe there is a probability of our doing so."

A singular conclusion was reached. It would seem that when two persons were placed in such imminent peril as Frank and Owen, they would have agreed in all essentials looking to a defense; but the opposite was the truth.

The longer they talked, the more diverse became their views, and the stronger each was set in his belief.

Frank insisted that if the front of the building was found clear, they should make the attempt to steal through the Ute lines, while Owen was equally positive that such a course would bring irretrievable disaster to both.

The strange decision was finally reached, that Frank should go and his cousin stay. The former promised that if he got beyond the line of circumvallation, he would use all effort to find their relatives and the ranchmen, and bring assistance to Owen without a moment's unnecessary delay. So long as the Utes knew nothing of the departure of one of the defenders, they would be as cautious and careful as if a dozen were within, while, in fact, one person inside the dugout would be as powerful as several.

This extraordinary agreement reached, Frank stealthily approached the door and listened a few moments. He could hear no signs of his enemies, and turning to his anxious cousin, whispered:

"I'm going to try it, Owen!"

CHAPTER VII.

OUT IN THE NIGHT.

The heavy bar was removed, the latch raised and the structure drawn silently back for several inches.

Nothing was seen or heard in the deep gloom without.

"I can't have a better chance," said Frank in a whisper; "hold the door as it is for ten minutes or so, for if I have to turn about and run back, I want to get in without delay."

"I shall expect you," said Owen, "and you can depend on the way being open for you."

"I hope you will not see me till I bring back help, then we'll let you know by firing our guns."

"I have little hope of that, but I shall pray for you."

"Well, good-by, old fellow."

Frank extended his hand, and it was warmly pressed by his friend, who murmured, in a broken voice:

"Good-by! Heaven protect you, Frank; I feel as though we shall never see each other again."

"Nonsense!" replied Frank, with a forced laugh, as he stealthily moved out into the gloom.

Owen, as he had said, was confident that his cousin would not go far before making a hurried retreat. Indeed, he would count it extremely good fortune if he were allowed to dash back and take refuge in the dugout again. It seemed to the younger that the cunning Utes were sure to detect what was going on; and then, by cutting off the brave fellow's retreat, quickly make him prisoner.

"I'll give him what help I can," muttered Owen, standing with the door slightly ajar, while he held his Winchester ready to open on the first dusky figure that came in sight.

He fixed his eyes with an affectionate longing upon Frank, for whom he was ready at any moment to risk his life. The darkness

was highly favorable, and, having made his start, the young scout was not likely to commit any serious mistake.

A few paces from the door he was seen to pause. He was looking right and left and in front for his enemies. It was at this moment that Owen expected him to whirl about and join him; but, instead of doing so, he sank on his hands and knees and began crawling forward, his rifle grasped in his right hand.

In Owen's position, there was no way of keeping count of the passage of the minutes, though by going to the smoldering embers, he could trace the hands of his watch, but he was sure that a quarter of an hour had passed by after Frank had disappeared into the darkness, while everything remained quiet on the outside.

He began to feel a faint fluttering of hope. Frank certainly had gone much further from the building than his cousin believed possible. Could it be that, as he hoped, the Utes were anticipating nothing of the kind, and that the way was open for him?

Owen had hardly formed the question, when in the gloom directly in front of him something began to shape and form.

For a minute or two he was uncertain whether it was reality or fancy, but to his amazement his eye then traced the outlines of a horse and rider, standing head on, and no more than a dozen feet from the door.

Their approach was so stealthy that he had not detected the slightest noise. It was as if the darkness had given silent birth to the specter which stood motionless in front of the dugout.

Owen readily traced the head and legs of the pony, while there was no mistaking the crown and straggling hair, even though not the faintest glimpse could be caught of the ugly features.

The muzzle of a rifle projected eight or ten inches above the head of the Ute, proving that he was holding the weapon in a peculiar fashion.

There was no explaining the meaning of this strange act on the part of the Indian horseman.

It may have had no special meaning. Possibly he was a new arrival, that had ridden forward to take a survey of the dugout as best he could, without dismounting, and the silence of his approach was only in accord with the practice of his race and people.

Little was to be gained by speculating upon his intentions, but it will be seen that no fairer target could be offered Owen Woodward.

Enshrouded in the blackness of the interior of the dugout—for the embers threw no light upon his figure—he could readily bring his gun to his shoulder and tumble the warrior from his pony, without incurring the least risk to himself, for nothing would be easier than to close and fasten the door, before any of the Utes could avenge the death of their comrade.

Twice Owen partly raised his Winchester for the purpose of shooting the savage from the back of his beast, but he lowered his weapon again without doing so.

There was something so heartless and cold-blooded in the act, that he could not quite bring himself to the point, though he well knew that there would have been no hesitation on the part of the Indian had the situations been reversed.

"No," muttered the youth, "I can't do it, even though I know it might benefit Frank as well as me."

Just then the Indian slipped from the back of his pony, which remained motionless, and walked slowly toward the building.

His head was lowered and his shoulders thrust forward in that crouching posture, which is the favorite one with his race at such times, so that he formed a startling figure while silently stealing toward the lad.

There were no other Indians in his field of vision, but he did not mean that this one should enter the dugout without question.

A strange, waggish impulse came over Owen at this moment. With his head at the crevice of the partly open door, he said, in a voice just loud enough to be heard by the astonished warrior:

"You may be handsome, old fellow, but you ain't good-looking enough to come in here!"

And then the door was closed and the heavy bolt slipped in place before the astounded Ute could recover from the amazement that caused him to stop short, as though he had caught the whirl of a rattlesnake at his very feet.

CHAPTER VIII.

BIG THUNDER.

No doubt the Ute warrior was astonished by the voice, but, if so, Owen was equally amazed by what followed.

Instead of hastily withdrawing, as the youth expected him to do, he paused a moment, as we have said, and then quietly stepped forward, and, raising his hand, struck a sharp summons on the door with his knuckles.

"What do you want?" was the natural query of the lad.

"Me Big Thunder," replied the Indian in broken English. "Want to come in—shake hands wid white brudder."

"You can't come in," repeated Owen. "I don't want to make your acquaintance. Wait till the ranchmen come back; they will shake your hands in a way that you'll never forget."

"Big Thunder good Injun; lub white brudder; come in—eat wid him. Bib Thunder hungry."

"There is plenty of game out there; you needn't go hungry. Why don't you shoot some antelope?"

"All dark—shoot 'em when sun come up."

"That won't be long; you can wait till then."

"Good many Utes, and more come. Break down door den take scalps ob brudders if don't let Big Thunder come in."

This threat was not without a certain pleasant effect upon the one to whom it was addressed, for it showed that the particular Ute who called himself Big Thunder had not yet learned of the departure of Frank Woodward. If the ignorance should continue a little longer, there was some hope that his cousin might succeed in passing the Indian lines.

Owen felt so secure in his position that he can be excused for a little boasting on his part.

"Why have the Utes been so long in getting in our house? They tried the door, but could not get in; they tried the window and lost two of their warriors; they cannot enter, for we shall shoot down every one who tries it; we could have shot Big Thunder when he sat on his pony, but we did not want to do so."

"Ugh! white brudder much afraid," grunted the warrior, who must have begun to see that his real intentions were understood.

"We are not afraid of Big Thunder and all his warriors; they could not catch us when they chased us over the prairie; they could not get in the dugout when they tried; let Big Thunder remain outside till the white men come back, and then they will shoot him and every one of his warriors."

"More Utes come," said the Indian, repeating what he had already said; "den kill all white men, burn dugout, take scalps ob two brudders inside—dat be bad."

"Yes; that will be very bad if Big Thunder can do it," was the sarcastic comment of the brave lad, who was half tempted to open the door far enough to allow him to shoot the savage.

Big Thunder again rapped with his knuckles, as though he was sure the lad dare not refuse him.

At this point, Owen resorted to an artifice that was not with-

out a certain ingenuity. He moved about with such noise, that he was sure the Indian must notice it. Then he spoke, as if addressing some one inside, giving the responses in a different voice. This was done with such cleverness that there could be little doubt that it deceived the hearer.

Then changing his voice, so as to make it seem like that of another person, he called out brusquely:

"Hello, out there! Didn't my friend tell you that we won't let you come in? So what's the use of knocking?"

"Oder brudder big fool," was the angry comment of the Ute. "Don't know—take him scalp. You let me in—won't hurt."

"If my brother is a fool, so am I, for I think just as he does; and I tell you, too, that you can't come in."

"Ugh!" growled Big Thunder, thoroughly out of patience; "won't wait—kill you, too!"

Owen rattled the door as if he was wrathful and meant to take a shot at the warrior or chief as he seemed to be.

Then he peered through the small orifice which permitted the latch-string to be shoved out.

That which he saw, compelled him to laugh in spite of himself.

The noise, as if unfastening the door, startled the Ute into the belief that he was about to receive a shot from the rear. He made a tremendous bound, as if a spear had been thrust into him, and whisked to one side to place himself out of range.

He must have glanced backward, and, seeing nothing of his enemy, he stole out on the plain, signaling his pony, who advanced to meet him.

Reaching out his hand, he caught his bridle, and, in a twinkling, both became invisible, hidden from sight by the obtruding walls of the dugout.

"It is strange," thought Owen, moving away from the door and seating himself on one of the buffalo robes, "if Frank has managed to get through the lines; he has been absent so long, that he ought to have failed or succeeded by this time. I wonder what would have been the result if I had gone with him. It is too much to believe that both of us would have eluded them, and I daren't hope that he is yet out of danger."

He listened intently, fearful that the recapture of his cousin would be announced by shouts and the firing of guns; but all remained as quiet as though there were not a solitary enemy within a hundred miles.

More than once a strange, half-formed decision entered the mind of Owen Woodward.

It seemed to him that if the enviroing Utes held no thought of any intention of flight on the part of the lads a half hour before, they were still less likely to fear it now, especially since his pointed conversation with Big Thunder.

Why not, then, make the effort to follow Frank?

The youth once walked to the door with the intention of venturing outside, but fortunately he restrained himself. He could not believe there was a possibility of success before him, and he shuddered at the thought of falling into the power of the Utes, after they had lost two of their warriors, shot down by a couple of youths, whom they must have felt sure of capturing.

Though Owen possessed less practical knowledge than his companion of the American Indians, he knew that the strongest controlling emotions of those people is that of revenge. It would not be the simple shooting down of the boys, if they were captured, but they would inflict terrible torture upon them.

Owen had no fear of falling asleep, for his nerves were in that condition that he was never more wakeful in all his life. Not only was he concerned about his own safety, for his situation, as will be admitted, was extremely perilous, but he was anxious about Frank.

Sometimes he thought his cousin had done not only a brave but a wise thing, and the next minute he was sure that it was the most imprudent step he could have taken, for failure was inevitable.

The interior of the dugout had long been wrapped in profound darkness. The embers were burned so low that only a single point of fire glowed among the ashes, like the eye of some serpent peering from its coil at the youth half reclining on the buffalo robe. The fiery point slowly grew dimmer, until it must soon die out altogether, unless stirred into life again.

The stillness, which at times was so oppressive, did not continue uninterruptedly. Now and then the tramp of horses' feet was heard, as though the riders were galloping their ponies about the building, with the purpose to warn the defenders that they were on the watch, and that all attempts to elude them must fail.

Then a few minutes later, perhaps, the straining ears of the watcher detected the stealthy footsteps of warriors, who must have taken little pains to hide the sounds, since it would have been very easy to do so.

All at once Owen heard the slightest possible noise at the window. He bounded like a flash to his feet, and stealthily approached the opening, wondering whether the Utes were foolish enough to risk another demonstration there.

The darkness outside seemed more profound than ever, and he could discover nothing to explain the noise that had disturbed him, nor could the closest attention discover its repetition.

"I must have been mistaken, or else it was the wind," he concluded, after standing for several minutes in the attitude of attention.

Since the departure of his cousin, there had come a slight disturbance in the air, which took the form of a wind that blew gently at intervals.

It was gentle indeed, but it added to the oppressiveness of his situation when it moaned around the dugout and occasionally caused a slight draft up the chimney.

Indeed, the youth found his position so lonely that he silently made his way to the hearth and raked the ashes from the expiring embers.

"They can't see me," he thought, "and a little light in this dismal place will help chase away the horrors."

The embers responded, and a sickly twist of flame sent its ghostly light through the interior, dimly showing the corners of the small apartment with its simple furniture.

"I'll wait till I am hungrier," he muttered, glancing at the remains of the antelope steak on the stand; "for I may need all that before this siege is ended. However, there's nothing to prevent me taking a few swallows of that water."

He raised the pail to his lips and drank, carefully setting it down again, for he realized that the water was far more precious than the food, and he meant that not a drop should be wasted.

The fuel was growing low again, and there were few extra sticks to be used. Even this moderate supply must soon be used up.

"I will burn it all, for somehow or other I have the belief that this is my last night in the dugout—"

He was startled, for at that moment something dropped down the chimney, falling directly upon the embers, and scattering them so that they burned the brighter and threw a fuller illumination through the apartment.

A glance showed that a large stone had descended the chimney, as if thrown by some one from above.

"They must be at work there," he said with a shudder; "that is the point to be feared after all. Hello! what's up now?"

Shouts and whoops were heard outside, accompanied by the sounds of horses' hoofs and the feet of men.

"They have captured Frank," gasped the startled Owen, "and have brought him back!"

CHAPTER IX.

WITHIN THE UTE LINES.

Meanwhile, in the darkness outside, Frank had crept steadily forward for perhaps a hundred feet, without seeing or hearing anything of his enemies. Then a slight noise on his right caused him to cease his forward movement, while he listened. He remained with his body resting on his hands and knees; for, appreciating the value of the minutes, he did not mean to lose one of them, if in his power to prevent it.

He caught the sound again, and, remembering the stories of the scouts and hunters, he sank flat and pressed his ear to the ground.

The sound of a horse's hoofs was now plainly heard, though he was not able to identify them when his head was in the air. Listening intently, he was not long in making the alarming discovery that the horseman was approaching.

Again raising his head a few inches, he caught the dim outlines of a pony with an Indian upon his back. They were not coming directly toward him, but diagonally; and unless the direction was changed, must approach so near that discovery was inevitable.

Instead of lying flat, Frank turned sharply to the left, creeping, with all the stealth and expedition in his power, for a distance of a dozen yards, when, fearful that he would be seen by the horse, if not by the rider, he again lay down.

Turning his head, his heart almost stopped beating, for the pony was within thirty feet of him, both he and his rider being in clear sight. They had changed their course, so that it partly corresponded with that of the fugitive.

Detection seemed certain, but Frank uttered a prayer that he might be saved even at the last moment. He resolved that if the warrior detected him, he would shoot him from his steed and endeavor to capture and mount it before it could get away.

Again the course of the pony was changed, and this time it led away from the anxious lad, who breathed freely for the first time when the animal broke into a moderate gallop and vanished in the gloom.

This occurrence, taking place while still so near the dugout, gave Frank a vivid idea of the perilous nature of the task he had undertaken. He must count upon more of the same kind before he dare rise to his feet.

He was still gazing in the direction where the Ute had disappeared, when his heart again rose in his mouth at the sound of hoofs, so distinct that they were identified without placing his ear to the earth, as he had been obliged to do a minute before.

There they were!

The apparition was so much like the other, that he would have believed the horse and rider were the same, but for the impossibility of such a change of position being made in so brief an interval of time.

"There's got to be a fight," concluded the lad, again bringing his Winchester to the front, and stealthily raising the hammer. "I wish it could take place further from the dugout."

But for the second time, Providence interfered, when it looked as if there was no escape for Frank. The horseman wheeled his pony sharply to one side, as if with the purpose of joining the one who was riding in the direction of the structure.

At this moment the horse gave a faint neigh, pricked his ears,

and threw up his head. He had observed that shadowy form on the ground, though it was unnoticed by his master. The animals of the plains are quick to detect such danger.

The call of the pony was answered by the other a short distance away, and who must have accepted it as meant for him. But for this unexpected occurrence, the warrior on his back would have investigated and learned the true cause of his steed's alarm.

If the warrior would only maintain the same position for a while, or if he could only know where they were gathered, the task he had set for himself would not have been so hard to accomplish; but the American Indian is a restless creature, and he had already received proof that they were to be expected in any place at any time.

A more startling proof of this fact came within the following minute, when the form of an Indian warrior on foot loomed to view directly in front of the lad.

At first the latter thought he was standing motionless, but a slight disturbance of the figure showed he was advancing, though in perfect silence.

Frank was about to move aside, when he saw that that would never do, since the distance between the two was so brief that the Indian could not fail to detect the first turn in his course.

The Ute being on foot, his head was much nearer the ground than if on horseback, and, since he was moving toward the dugout behind the lad, it was manifestly impossible for him to come more than a step or two nearer without detecting the singular obstruction in his path.

Although the Ute was walking in his stealthy fashion when first observed, it was soon apparent to the youth that he had stopped.

He was standing erect and as motionless as a statue.

"He has discovered me," was the conclusion of Frank, still lying on the ground and awaiting the first step of his dusky enemy before discharging his Winchester. "He hasn't any horse for me to take, but I will run for it."

CHAPTER X.

DISCOVERED AT LAST.

There was not the least doubt on the part of Frank Woodward that the Ute warrior in his front had discovered his presence on the ground and had stopped to identify him before leaping forward to make his deadly assault.

The lad did not mean to be anticipated. He knew his life was at stake, and he was not the one to allow any dusky foe to get the drop on him.

What he feared was that the Ute, without stirring from where he had halted, would make a lightning-like whirl of his tomahawk; but nothing appeared more likely than that he would advance a step or two before proceeding to such an extremity.

In the dim gloom Frank was sure he detected a movement of his arms, the meaning of which he could not divine, though it became apparent a moment later.

To his astonishment, a point of light flashed out near the waist of the warrior, and then arose to his face, where it was partly screened from sight. Instead of using the flint and tinder, common among his people, this savage possessed some modern lucifer matches, and he had ignited one of them by drawing it against his thigh, after the fashion of many of our own race.

The instant the tiny stick caught the flame, he raised it to his face, shading the blaze from the gentle wind in the usual way of curving his two palms around it.

The warrior had merely paused to light his pipe.

So profound was the stillness that Frank plainly heard the slight but peculiar sound made by his lips in the act of drawing on the pipe. He evidently meant to be sure that the rank tobacco was fired, for he continued to hold the match over the bowl, less protected than before against the wind, and drew so hard that the volume of vapor could be seen issuing like the puffs of a miniature steam engine from his mouth. Finally, everything was in satisfactory shape, and smoking away with no little enjoyment, he resumed his walk in the direction of the dugout.

These brief moments of respite were improved to the utmost by the frightened lad. The instant he understood the Indian had paused to light his pipe, and had not seen him, he knew his attention would be fully occupied for a few seconds with the operation. With less attention to stealth than he had shown before, Frank turned to the left and crept as fast as he could.

No escape could have been narrower, but it was perfect, and the warrior, like his predecessors, quickly faded from view in the darkness, while the brave lad was once more left to continue his perilous progress through the lines of the enemy.

"I wonder how many more there are of them?" was his natural thought, as he resumed his progress.

The boy was now disturbed by a singular but not unreasonable misgiving.

It will be remembered that he had been compelled to change his course more than once since leaving the dugout, and he feared that he had lost his reckoning.

There were no landmarks by which he could gain the least help. The dugout itself had long been out of sight.

He looked up at the stars with an instinctive prayer for guidance in his perplexity.

"The moon won't rise for some hours yet," he reflected, "unless I am away off in my reckoning. I have lost all idea of the points of the compass, and so it wouldn't be of any help to me if it should hurry up and appear ahead of time."

Concentrating his thoughts as best he could on the problem, he tried to recall the changes made in his course. The result was, that he decided by swerving considerably to the right he would be leaving the dugout directly behind him.

"At any rate," was his sensible conclusion, "it is the best and only thing I can do; so here goes."

By this time, as may be supposed, he was pretty well tired out from his unnatural means of progression. It seemed to him he had traveled about half a mile on his hands and knees, though he knew the distance was considerably less; but whatever it might be, he decided that he was warranted in rising to his feet and proceeding in a more civilized fashion.

He therefore straightened up and stood for a minute peering intently around in the gloom. Nothing met his vision, but he was quite sure he heard the faint sounds of feet behind him. He accepted that as evidence that he was pursuing the right direction, for the Utes were more likely to keep near the dugout than at a distance from it.

Patient listening satisfied him that the horsemen were not approaching, since the sounds grew more indistinct and soon died out altogether.

"I believe I am on the right track— Hello!"

He had walked but a short way when he found himself ascending a ridge of slight altitude. He slackened his pace with some alarm, for, if this were the elevation he had in mind, it proved he was nearer his starting point than he supposed, and much more than was pleasant to know.

He could not make himself believe he was through the lines of the enemy, who were liable to come down upon him without a moment's warning.

However, without hesitation he walked up the ridge and down the other side, where he once more entered upon a level stretch of prairie, such as he had ridden over for many scores of miles during the preceding week.

A faint light appeared in the horizon directly in front. Puzzled to understand what it meant, he concluded that it must be the illumination from some distant camp-fire, which he had not noticed until over the ridge.

"It would be strange if that were the fire kindled by father and uncle for our guidance—can it be possible?"

To his unbounded amazement the rim of the moon became visible the next minute, as it rapidly climbed into plainer view.

The hour was much later than he supposed, and in a few minutes he would have the orb of night to guide his footsteps. It seemed as if nature was favoring him for having got away from the vicinity of the dugout; he needed something of this kind to help him in his search for his friends.

At the very moment he was rejoicing over the unexpected and favorable change in his surroundings, two horsemen rode directly across the line of light made by the rising moon on the prairie. Their figures were thrown in strong relief against the yellow background, and they were within stone's throw of the astounded youth.

But for the moon, Frank might have eluded them, as he had done before, but this time he was discovered.

CHAPTER XI.

FRIENDS IN NEED.

"Hello, stranger! where'd you come from?" shouted one of the horsemen, as he galloped straight toward the astonished Frank Woodward.

Could any greeting have been more delightful? For surely that was the voice of a white man, and, in that wild country, all such must be friends.

It had never occurred to the youth that these strangers were other than Ute Indians, who would act like tigers toward him. His blood tingled with renewed hope, and he walked rapidly forward to meet them.

"Thank Heaven!" he exclaimed; "I was sure you were Indians."

"And what would you have done if we had happened to b'long to that vintage?"

"I would have made the best fight I could."

"Them's big words to come from one of your size; but I don't mean to say you wouldn't keep your word, which bein' so, reach up here, pard, and shake."

By this time the two ranchmen were at hand, and Frank gladly saluted them, for no persons in the world, except his father and uncle, could have been more welcome.

Frank knew before they told him that these were the two ranchmen who owned the dugout, and who were on their way back to it. They wore the broad-brimmed sombreros so popular among the cowboys further south, were armed with Winchesters and revolvers, were magnificent horsemen, brave, rough of speech, and kind of heart, and among the most hospitable people in the world.

Naturally, after the greetings were over, their inquiries were as to how it came that such a likely-looking youth was wandering over the prairie on foot at that lonely hour of the night. As succinctly as Frank knew how, he related the story which is familiar to the reader.

As may be supposed, his listeners were astounded.

They were Amos Arkell and Jim Halpine, owners of the dug-

out and a herd of several thousand cattle, grazing some miles distant on the banks of one of the small rivers of that section.

They had spent the afternoon and part of the night in making the change of grazing ground, and were now returning to their quarters, with no knowledge or suspicion of what had taken place during their absence.

"We've had several brushes with the Utes," said Arkell, "and last summer, Arkansaw Jim—one of our men—was killed; but since then things have slid along so quiet like that I begin to think that Big Thunder and his varmints would let us alone."

"Your dwelling seems strong enough," said Frank, "to keep out a whole tribe of Indians."

"So it is; but it's a mighty poor place to stay in," remarked Jim Halpine; "and while a lot of 'em were holding us there, a few others could drive off our cattle. So, you see, things ain't in the best shape in the world."

"It seems to me they are in the worst shape," observed the youth, who wondered that these two ranchmen would take such risks as they must face every day and night.

"There wouldn't be any fun in the bus'ness if it was all clear sailing and the sun shone every day," was the philosophical remark of Arkell; "the same risk is run by all the cowboys atween British America and the Rio Grande, though I'll admit it's a little worse in some places and this is about the worst of all."

"Do you think my cousin will be able to keep off the Utes until we can go to his help?" was the anxious inquiry of the lad.

"I don't see why he can't, 'specially if the varmints don't know that he's alone."

"My presence here proves that they are unaware of my flight, for they never would have let me through, if they could have prevented it."

"There's reason in that," replied Arkell, pleased with the brightness and pluck of the youth; "but I think you told me your father and uncle were somewhere about these parts."

"Yes, we separated to engage in a hunt for antelope; the Utes came down on my cousin and me, and they didn't give us much chance to think of anything else until we were fortunate enough to run against your dugout. By that time it was night."

"I wonder now," said Halpine addressing his companion, "whether that smoke we seen off to the left wasn't from their camp; we concluded they was white men instead of reds."

"I have no doubt our friends were there," said Frank, deeply interested, "and the smoke was meant as a signal to us."

Frank's anxiety was to find his friends, but he was still more anxious to see Owen extricated from his dangerous situation. It did not look as if Arkell and Halpine would be able to do that without help, since there were more than half a dozen of the Indians, all of whom had horses and were known to be brave fighters. He therefore waited with some anxiety to learn the intentions of his new friends.

"We ain't such fools as to sail in and try to raise the hair of Big Thunder (for he's with 'em, I know), and the rest of his gang; but them folks has got to learn that when they come fooling around our dugout they're likely to git hurt."

"Why not join my uncle and father? and then, with me to help you, we can rout the whole party."

"I don't doubt it, for there's no mistake about your grit; but—"

The ranchman became silent. It was evident he was thinking over the situation before giving his conclusion. Like all those of his class, he did not mean to make any mistake when ready to act.

"The idea is a good one," observed Arkell, at the close of his brief reverie, "and we'll do it."

"I'm a thousand times obliged to you," exclaimed the grateful lad; "for now I know we shall succeed."

"But there's a little bus'ness that must be 'tended to afore we take the big contract."

"What's that?"

"You must have a hoss."

"I can't tell you how much I miss one; but I don't see how it is possible to get another in this country."

"I don't believe you can, but if I'm not mistook, I can hit on a way, but it'll take some tall hustling."

As may be supposed, Frank Woodward listened eagerly to what the ranchman had to say.

"The way is this: the varmints have borrowed your pony, so we'll be just as kind as them and borrow one of theirs."

"A splendid thing, if it can be done, for they not only took the horse of my friend, but shot mine."

Without heeding the last remark, Amos and Jim now held a short consultation.

They talked in low tones, but as Frank stood directly between their horses, he heard every word, though good taste forbade him to make any comment on what passed.

"I'll take the job," said Amos; "you can keep the younker with you till I git back."

"Hadn't you better have my help?"

"I don't need it," said Arkell, who then explained more fully the scheme he had formed for securing the indispensable animal for the young man.

"It's all fixed," said Halpine, turning toward him. "Give me your hand, and git up behind me on my hoss."

It was easy for the lad to do as requested, with the aid of his muscular friend, and a thrill of stronger hope than before passed through him when he felt himself once more astride of a tough courser of the plains, and in the company of two veterans who knew not only the country thoroughly, but the dangerous people that occupied and claimed it as their own.

A minute after Frank had placed himself astride Halpine's horse, the men headed in the direction of the dugout and moved forward on a cautious walk.

The hour was late, the moon was climbing the heavens, and even without its light, the couple were familiar with every rod of ground over which it was necessary to pass. Indeed, they would have preferred that there should be no moon at all, since its light rendered greater caution necessary on their part.

CHAPTER XII.

DANGEROUS BUSINESS.

The ranchmen advanced but a short distance, when Arkell, who was a few steps ahead of his companion, halted, the latter riding beside him before he did the same.

As may be supposed, Frank Woodward was on the alert. He could see nothing of the dugout, nor was there a sign of a single Ute Indian in the neighborhood. He had noticed one fact, however, which he believed would prove of great benefit to his friend in the delicate and difficult task he had set himself.

Although the moon was bright and nearly full, yet it had climbed but a short way up the heavens when it entered a rift of clouds. There were more masses of vapor in its path, so that its light was treacherous and uncertain. A skillful scout prefers such an atmosphere to all others, since it can be turned to advantage, and there could be no sort of doubt that Amos Arkell was fully competent to make the best possible use of the favorable condition.

He now requested Frank to dismount and take his place in the

saddle, since from that point he meant to advance on foot. The youth quickly did as requested.

"Where is the dugout?" asked the latter.

By way of reply, the ranchman pointed at right angles to the course that Frank had supposed to be the right one.

"That proves I was turned around," he said.

"There's a ridge that must be crossed," explained Arkell, "and on the other side is a stream of water which finds its way into the Platte, after hunting a long time for it. I don't s'pose you seen it?"

The lad replied that he and his cousin had not noticed anything of the kind.

"That's 'cause you come from the wrong direction; but it's there, all the same, and along that stream, unless I'm mighty mistook, are the hosses belonging to the Utes. Them's what I'm arter, and all you've got to do is to wait here till I arrive."

And without any more directions, he moved off at a cautious pace, his shoulders thrown slightly forward, while his Winchester was held in a trailing position. The moon just then was partly hidden behind the clouds, so that he quickly disappeared from sight.

"Do you think he'll succeed?" asked Frank, when he found himself alone with Halpine.

"It's hard to tell," was the answer; "but if he don't, he'll kick up the biggest kind of a rumpus. Amos likes that sort of business, and I shouldn't be s'prised if he goes under this time."

Frank looked at his friend in astonishment. He referred to the probable death of his companion as he might have mentioned the impending loss of one of his cattle.

"I suppose," thought he, "that this kind of life accustoms them to danger, just as soldiers become familiar with all forms of suffering. He did not even say good-by to his partner, when he is uncertain whether they shall ever see each other again."

"It'll be rather bad," added Jim Halpine, in the same voice, "if Amos should happen to pass in his checks."

"I should say it would!" exclaimed Frank.

"But you don't understand what I mean; you see, Amos, and Arkansaw Jim, and me, owned about five thousand cattle; but Jim, he got sort of down-hearted like—think he received bad news from the East about some girl that he thought a good deal of—and he didn't seem to care what become of him. So he proposed to Amos and me to buy him out, and we done so. As good luck had it, that was all fixed just afore Big Thunder tumbled him off his pony when we was getting ready for our reg'lar round-up."

"It seemed to put your business in a shape that saved you and Arkell from a deal of trouble."

"That's what I was gettng at; and now me and Amos are pards on equal terms, so that, if he don't come back ag'in, things will be sorter mixed, being as he's got a wife and two little yonkers in Missouri, and it will be a big job to shape matters as they orter be."

Halpine had made clear that the prospect of adjusting their business caused him more concern than the probability that his partner would pass over to the "silent majority."

Meanwhile, Arkell lost no time in pushing through the perilous task he had in hand.

He walked rapidly, but, since he could not know the location of the enemies that were somewhere near, he was liable to run directly among them, and not only frustrate his own purpose, but sacrifice his life; for the Utes would make no attempt to take him prisoner, and he had no way of dodging the storm of bullets that were sure to greet his discovery.

It was this contingency which caused him to slacken his foot-

steps after passing the ridge, and while still at a considerable distance from the stream of water.

He could see and hear nothing, and a glance at the sky showed the moon in the act of reappearing from behind the clouds that had obscured its face for several minutes. The ranchman sank to the ground, lying as flat as he could. The sparse grass could not screen his body from the sight of any one close at hand, but it will be readily understood that he was less liable to be seen than if standing erect.

Before resorting to this simple means, he had detected the faintest possible outlines apparently of a hedge in front. It marked the course of the water, which was his objective point, and showed where the grass was more luxuriant, while a species of bush, resembling the mesquite of Texas, fringed the stream.

This was the shelter he desired to reach; for, though he might be compelled to enter the water, he could maneuver with more safety than on the open plain.

Lying thus on the ground he pressed his ear to the earth in accordance with the practice of those in his situation. At first he fancied he detected the stamp of a horse's hoof, but it was not repeated, and with all his acuteness he could not decide what point of the compass it came from.

His conclusion was that the Utes were further away than he had supposed. As a consequence, he did that which under other circumstances would have been pronounced extremely perilous. Rising to a crouching posture again, he ran forward, never pausing until he arrived at the shelter which has already been described.

He was encouraged at his success, though, as will be understood, he was only upon the edge of the desperate scheme before him.

By following the course of the stream for two hundred yards, he would reach a point directly opposite the dugout, and no more than one-fourth of that distance from it. His theory was that the Utes, having determined upon a brief siege of the building, had brought their ponies down to the stream nearby, and left a part or all of them there. They were not likely to be guarded very closely, and he was resolved to risk his life in the attempt to capture one for a person of whose existence he never dreamed of two hours previous.

Without waiting, he now began creeping toward the supposed camp, or rendezvous, of the animals, eyes and ears on the alert for the first appearance of danger, which beyond question was at hand.

Sooner indeed than he anticipated, it appeared; for, before he had progressed two rods, he became aware that he was in the presence of not one Ute warrior, but of several.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE RECAPTURE.

It was well for Amos Arkell, the ranchman, that he had the shelter of the scant grass and bushes lining the stream, along which he was stealthily making his way to the spot whence he hoped to find the horses of the Utes gathered; for, had it been otherwise, assuredly he must have been discovered.

The first warning he received was a peculiar, pig-like grunt, which he recognized as the voice of one of his enemies, to which instant reply was given by another. Although the warriors could have felt no fear of enemies, they were walking with as much care and silence as if stealing into the camp of a foe.

The white man sank down so close to the water that his feet were in it, while the trio of Indians sauntered along side by side, and as luck would have it, came to a halt directly opposite where

he was crouching, and so close that he could have touched any one of them by extending the muzzle of his gun.

The face of none was turned toward him, though the position of a couple was such that when the moon shone with full power he could detect their profiles. Standing thus, they held a conversation, in which all took part.

Arkell could not use the mongrel tongue of the Utes, though he had picked up enough knowledge of the jargon to gather the subject of the talk.

As nearly as he could tell, they were discussing the probabilities of securing the two youths, whom they believed still to be in the dugout. The Indians were wrathful, for they had lost two of their number from the fire of the lads, whom they had held in such contempt that they sought to take them prisoners, when it would have been the easiest thing in the world to shoot both from the single horse that bore them to the door of the dugout.

Then some reference was made to the ranchmen, who were liable to return at any hour. Arkell could not gather the full meaning of what was said on this point, though he used his wits to the utmost.

He was more anxious to ascertain whether the Utes had fixed upon any definite scheme, but he was disappointed in this wish; and when, a few minutes later, the three turned about and walked off with the same noiselessness that they had approached, it cannot be said that the white man had added much to his store of knowledge.

But he had become more convinced than before that he was upon the right track; and, without delay, he resumed his cautious advance along the edge of the stream.

He had progressed but a short distance when the wisdom of his course was confirmed, for he heard the stamp of a horse's foot, instantly followed by that of others.

He glanced at the moon, and saw that it was once more emerging from behind the clouds. It would not do to go any further until the gloom was favorable. He therefore halted, and patiently waited the few minutes necessary.

He could not avoid, however, slightly parting the bushes and peering along the upper edge of the cover, toward the point where he knew several of the ponies were standing.

He caught the outlines of one animal with his head toward him, while the dim figures of two others could be discerned just beyond. No Indians were in sight, but beyond question there were more nearer at hand than was agreeable.

Taking pains to make no noise, he speedily crawled the intervening distance, placing himself in such a position that he was separated from the nearest pony by the thickness of the thin line of bushes only.

At this juncture he perceived that the animal was tied in place by the bridle rein, which was wound around one of the strongest bushes. This was within reach of his hand without stirring a foot from where he was crouching.

A little dextrous work of one hand and the end of the bridle rein was slipped over the top of the twisted bush, and the horse was free to be led or driven in any direction. Arkell arose partly to his feet, and the pony drew back his head with a whinny of alarm.

So sudden was the recoil, that had not the white man been expecting something of the kind, the animal would have slipped from his grasp, but he held firmly, and rising upright, reached up the other hand, holding his Winchester, and patted the nose of the snorting beast in the effort to soothe his fears.

This was speedily accomplished, and all would have been well but for the slight flurry that had just taken place. Arkell was surprised that the steed was held by a regular bridle rein instead

of the thong of buffalo rope generally used by the Utes, and this surprise was increased when he observed at this moment that the animal was also furnished with a saddle quite similar to the one he was accustomed to use himself.

"I'm only taking what the varmints have stole," was his conclusion, as, having quieted the pony, he began cautiously leading him away from the spot.

But the matter was not yet settled. Although most of the Utes were near the dugout, there was one with the horses, and when he saw a steed walking quietly away, without apparent cause, he ran nimbly forward to investigate.

"Hoooh!" he muttered, catching sight of the shoulders and sombrero of the ranchman on the other side of the animal.

Arkell was on the point of vaulting into the saddle with the intention of dashing off, when the unwelcome visitor appeared.

It would not have done to carry out this purpose, for the warrior was so close that he could not have escaped the shot by throwing himself forward on his neck, as he might have done had the distance been greater.

The scene that followed was not without its ludicrous features. The Ute with another exclamation ran around the rear of the pony, to gain a better view of the daring thief, but the latter was watching him, and slipped to the other side of the horse, so as to interpose his body between him and the enemy. At the same time he pulled at the bridle rein until the animal was forced into a gentle trot, thereby compelling the warrior to do the same.

It was singular that the latter did not emit a shout of alarm which would have quickly brought his friends to the spot, thereby adding tenfold to the peril of the white man; but it must have been that he considered the curious task one which he was competent to manage himself.

Be that as it may, he continued trotting after the man and beast, and, finding the former was still partly screened, he slipped across the heels of the animal to the other side, being just in time to catch a fleeting glimpse of the white man as he whisked under the neck of the animal, which must have been mystified by the performances at the front and rear.

It will be seen that an important result of this peculiar strategy was that Arkell was steadily drawing his prize away from a most dangerous locality, and securing one enemy instead of many to combat.

The Ute must have awakened to the fact, for, giving up his fruitless pursuit, he made a sudden leap, which placed himself at the head instead of the tail of the pony. He held his gun in his left hand, while his knife was grasped in his right.

Arkell could not avoid him further, except by letting go of his prize and darting to the rear. He did not wish to fire his gun, since he was afraid more of the Utes were nearby, and there was a chance of escaping a fight under such unfavorable circumstances.

He made a move, as if he meant to maintain his dodging tactics, and the Ute, with another "Hoooh!" ducked his head and darted after him. Before he could straighten up, the white man whirled like a flash and delivered a terrific and lightning-like blow, which caught the unsuspecting warrior on the side of the head and sent him spinning backward a dozen feet, where he lay as senseless as if the breath of life had been knocked from his body.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SOUND OF MANY FEET.

The Ute was completely *hors de combat*, and required no further attention at the hands of the ranchman who had disposed of him with such cleverness. Had the simpleton been less eager to

manage the business himself, and summoned his comrades the moment he discovered something amiss, there might have been a very different story to tell. As it was, his pain was far less than his humiliation, when he was able to climb uncertainly to his feet and go to Big Thunder with his report.

"You may not be quite so purty in the face," muttered Amos Arkell, surveying the prostrate form, "but you're certain to know a good deal more than you ever knowed afore."

Vaulting into the saddle, the ranchman cast a hurried glance behind him, but saw nothing of the other Utes. The capture of the pony had been managed with such skill, that no other members of the party suspected what was going on under their very eyes.

Frank Woodward surveyed the pony as he approached, and uttered an exclamation of surprise and pleasure.

"Well, now that is a piece of fortune. "You have captured the horse that belongs to my cousin."

"I wondered how it was he happened to have the reg'lar saddle and bridle," said Arkell, looking down at the animal, as though he had not noticed him before; "he seems to be a likely critter."

"So he is; there isn't a better one in the country, and the noble fellow would have taken us out of all danger, if he hadn't been worn out and used up. But he has had a good rest, and is able to take his part with any of them."

"Which being so, we'll trade," added the ranchman, slipping from his saddle and changing places with the youth.

While this simple proceeding was under way, Amos gave the particulars of his exploit, which he seemed to think amounted to nothing, as in truth may be said to have been the case, when compared with many other acts in which he had been engaged during his years in the cattle business.

"What will the Utes think when your friend goes back and tells them what has taken place?" asked Frank.

"They will think he got a purty good rap; if they don't, he won't have any doubt about it himself."

"But will they suspect the whole truth?"

"They can't help it," said Halpine, taking upon himself to reply; "they know who owns the dugout, and must have been expecting us back long ago, though they don't seem to have been doing much in the way of watching for us."

"I can see that it must be a help to Owen," said Frank, whose chief anxiety was for his cousin; "the Utes will find themselves obliged to give some attention to the outside of the dugout as well as the inside, and he will have a little rest."

"Well," observed Arkell, "the next thing is to hunt up your friends. I reckon by the time we find them, morning won't be very fur off, and we'll fix up what is to be done."

As the little party rode over the prairie, they occasionally reined up and looked around, taking a moment when the moon shone from an unclouded sky. Once Halpine slipped from his saddle and bent his ear to the ground.

"What is it?" asked his friend.

"I'm afeared it's them," he said.

Arkell was out of the saddle in an instant. He was prone only a few seconds when he muttered an angry exclamation:

"So it is, as sartin as you live!"

To Frank it was unaccountable that the Utes should withdraw from the dugout to follow them. He anxiously awaited an explanation.

"Just get down here, younker," said Arkell, "and tell me if that ain't enough to make a man hit his grandmother."

The ear of the youth, pressed against the ground, recognized a peculiar sound. It was not that made by a single horse or by several of them, but seemingly by a multitude. There was a

strange tramping, as if thousands of buffaloes were on a dead run across the prairie, and the fact that it was becoming more distinct every minute proved they were approaching the spot where the three horsemen had halted.

"I never heard anything like it before," said Frank; "it sounds as if there were a thousand Indians."

"Injins!" repeated Arkell, with a laugh; "them ain't Injins."

"What are they?"

"Them's cattle, and they belong to us," he added, angrily.

"They all seem to be on the run."

"So they are; they're running like a lot of stampeded bufflers."

"What is the cause?"

"Now you can say Injins, for that's what's the matter; some of them Utes are among our cattle, and, if I ain't mistook, there'll be about as lively times as you've ever heard of afore long. See here," added the ranchman, who could not be forgetful of the lad, even in the excitement over the possible loss of all his property; "we're going to give you the biggest kind of a lift we know how, but the fust thing to be did is to look arter them critters of ours."

"Is there any way in which I can help you?"

"Not the least; but see here. Jest fix in your mind where the moon and two or three of the brightest stars are. Then observe that the head of your pony is p'inted in the right course, and keep straight on that way for a matter of a couple of miles, and you'll hit the wood where we seen the smoke of the camp-fire."

"But don't forget," added Halpine, "that them folks may be the Utes, for the varmints seem to be gitting mighty thick in these parts of late."

"Shall I see no more of you?" asked Frank, feeling a little bewildered over the shape matters were assuming.

"Just as soon as we straighten up this cattle stampede, we'll make a hunt for you, and you can count on us till death; so good-bye to you."

And without saying anything more, the ranchmen gave rein to their ponies and galloped off in the night, leaving Frank to pursue his way alone in quest of help for his cousin, who must be wondering what had become of him.

It dampened his spirits considerably to find himself deserted in this unexpected fashion, but he reflected that no fault could be found with Arkell and Halpine for doing precisely as they had done. They had too much at stake to allow their valuable drove of cattle to be driven off under their own eyes, while, as for Owen, it certainly looked as if he would "keep" for an indefinite time.

When Frank left, it was with the expectation that if the best of fortune attended him he would not return before daylight, and there was still reason to hope that that might be done.

As matters stood, he had made his way successfully through the lines of the hostile Utes, and in addition had recovered the abandoned pony, a feat that seemed impossible a short time before. Surely there was cause to congratulate himself and be thankful.

The lad was highly pleased to notice that the horse was thoroughly rested. He must have spent several hours cropping the grass along the stream, so that he was in good condition and fitted to carry a man for his life.

"I don't think there's much chance of any of the Utes overhauling me," he reflected; "unless I should ride into some trap, but it strikes me that those cattle are more anxious for my company than I am for theirs."

The peculiar multitudinous tramping he had noticed when his ear was on the ground, was now so distinct that it was plainly heard from the back of his horse. Supposing he had been riding

across the line of their flight since parting with the ranchmen, this struck him as curious.

"I don't know whether they would run me down if I happened to get in their path," he reflected, looking anxiously in the direction of the sounds; "but I am sure I would prefer not to make the experiment."

Having received such specific directions from Arkell, as to the course to take to reach the grove, where the signal fire was seen, he was unwilling to be driven from the path, unless he should find that self-preservation obliged such a change. He therefore rode forward at a swinging gallop, hopeful that before the panic-stricken cattle should appear he would be beyond all danger from them.

CHAPTER XV.

A SHARP SCRIMMAGE.

It is not to be supposed that Frank Woodward would have met with the least difficulty in making his way to the timber where he hoped to find his father and uncle, had no unexpected obstruction risen in his path.

But the immense drove of cattle, whose approach had been discovered by their owners long before they were visible, swerved from the course they were following at that time, and, trending to the left, showed themselves not only on the side but in front of the young man.

The latter saw at a glance that if he pushed on, he would find himself directly among the terrified animals. He would have reined up, but for the fact that he was still in their path, though the larger number by far would pass in front.

There was but one thing to do, and that was to wheel about and dash back over his own trail for a short distance, and he proceeded to do that without a moment's delay. It broke the resolution he had formed to push straight to the timber, but, as will be seen, there was no choice.

The sight of the enormous drove coming at full speed, with their tails in the air, their heads lowered, their horns striking and rattling against each other, while the impact of thousands of feet filled the air with a thunderous tumult, was enough to startle any one.

The pony was more terrified than at the charge of a hundred mounted Indians. He needed no urging to gallop back at a breakneck pace, and his rider found it hard to restrain him, after he had cleared the path of the living tornado of animals.

Drawing him up at last, Frank faced around toward the herd and surveyed the singular sight.

Meanwhile, where were the Utes?

If it was they who had started this mad flight, they could not be far off. Probably they were at the rear, urging the beasts to still madder speed.

The lad had hardly asked himself the question, when he was startled by the sharp crack of a rifle, seemingly almost in his face.

The darkness for several minutes had been increasing, because of the clouds passing in front of the moon, but he could not detect the form which fired the shot.

While wondering what it all meant, a second, third, and fourth shot followed. There were whoops, too, which he recognized as uttered by red men, while mingled with the strange cries were shouts that sounded very much as if they came from the throats of Amos Arkell and Jim Halpine.

The next instant Frank caught sight of men on horseback skurrying by like the whirlwind, their bodies thrown forward or to one side of their steeds, as if to use the latter for shields.

The ranchmen were fighting to save their property, and it looked very much as if the lively times, prophesied by Arkell, had arrived.

Naturally the young man was absorbed at once in the stirring scene before him. More than that, he was eager to do something for his friends who had shown such kindness to him.

When, therefore, he caught sight of a horse charging by him, as if fired from the mouth of some giant piece of ordnance, the rider leaning far over to escape the bullets hurtling around him, Frank brought his Winchester to his shoulder, and hardly pausing to aim, let fly.

He missed, and he thanked Heaven that such was the fact, for hardly had he pulled trigger, when, to his horror, he saw that the rider was one of his friends. Had the shot been less hurried, he would have slain Arkell or Halpine.

But he was determined to do his part. He had been turned off his course in trying to reach his relatives, and he would need the aid of the ranchmen to find them. They had told him he could be of no help in the scrimmage that was now under way, but he meant to prove their mistake, though it need not be said he realized that it would never do to make the mistake of a moment before.

Before the combatants could whirl out of sight, he dashed his pony among them, on the alert for a chance to put in a shot where it would do the most good.

The favoring light of the moon enabled him to identify the white and red men. There were four of the latter, and they were fighting like demons, throwing themselves first on one side of their horses and then on the other, and firing sometimes from beneath the necks of their ponies at their assailants, who fought much after the same fashion.

Frank had fixed his attention on a shrieking Ute, whose long, black hair streamed straight out in the wind, as he kept whooping and with his head sometimes below and sometimes on the neck of his steed, he blazed away with his gun, as often as he could load and fire it, for it was not of the repeating pattern.

Believing he had a good chance, the youth aimed more carefully, and was in the act of pulling the trigger, when a shot from one of the ranchmen struck the Indian's pony, causing him to make a frenzied plunge in the air, and then to go down much as did the trampled animal a few minutes before.

The Ute was too agile to be caught, and, landing squarely on his feet, made a sudden dart to one side to escape his enemies, who now had him at a great disadvantage.

Before any one could divine his purpose, he shot beneath the horse of Arkell, skillfully dodging a blow which he aimed at him with his rifle.

The dexterity of the warrior was wonderful, and, for a time, eluded every effort of the white men.

Frank Woodward was eagerly watching for an opportunity to get in his work, when he caught a glimpse of something like a ball shooting through the air.

The next instant he was struck in the chest with such prodigious force that he was knocked almost senseless from his saddle and sent rolling in the dirt, while the Ute, who had performed the amazing feat, uttered a howl of defiance and spurred the pony which he had so dexterously captured after his flying comrades.

CHAPTER XVI.

CLEVERLY DONE.

One of the Utes had been shot dead by Halpine, another was so badly wounded by Arkell that he was practically out of the fight, and he and the others decided that the cattle were of no

further interest to them. The only wise thing, therefore, they could do, was to leave the spot with the least possible delay.

The cattle having been started on their panic-stricken flight, could be depended upon to keep it up until tired out. They were running so hard that this was likely to take place at the end of two or three miles.

It was useless for their owners to try to check them; all that could be done was to change the line of their flight. Had there been a dozen cattlemen to surround the herd, they might have been brought to a halt, after hard and skillful work; but, as will be seen, it was out of the power of any two cowboys to do that, and our friends did not make any essay in that direction.

Leaving the cattle to run their race, Arkell and Halpine gave their attention to the Utes themselves, it being their purpose to teach them a lesson they would never forget. The Indians were so well mounted that their animals held their own quite well, while the confusion caused by the stampeded cattle—that were continually in the way of fleetier ponies—caused much wild and inaccurate firing.

Jim Halpine was giving his attention to the dismounted Ute, when he witnessed the wonderful feat by which he knocked Frank Woodward from the back of his steed, and took his place. Arkell just then was occupied elsewhere, and did not see it.

"They've got that pony ag'in," muttered Halpine. "Amos brought him back once, and now I'll try a hand at the same business."

It has been stated that the Utes were now very willing to leave the cattle to their owners, and they would have been exceedingly glad had the latter bestowed undivided attention on them. They began edging away, gradually heading toward the dugout, which they hoped to reach ahead of their white enemies, who would receive a warm reception if they should attempt to follow thither.

But Arkell and Halpine were in deadly earnest. Their blood was up, and they were fighting with all the fury of their nature.

The instant the Ute found himself in the saddle from which he had knocked the lad, he whirled the head of the pony sharply to the left, struck the heels of his moccasins against his sides, and shrieking in his ear, sent him flying over the prairie. Halpine, almost at the same instant, changed the course of his own horse, and brought his Winchester to his shoulder with the intention of shooting the daring thief from the back of the stolen steed.

But the cunning Ute was on the watch for that very thing. Instead of heading directly away, he swerved slightly, so that his pony presented himself quartering to his pursuer. Halpine's chief wish was to recapture the valuable steed, and the shooting of the Ute, necessary though it was, was only preliminary to that task.

Being specially anxious, therefore, to avoid inflicting any injury on the tough little animal, he refrained from firing, when he saw the risk of hurting him. The Ute was lying, as may be said, on the further side of his animal, whose body thus became a shield against the bullets of the fiery ranchman.

The latter could have ended the whole matter very summarily by firing through the pony and the body of his rider, but, for reasons already given, he refrained from doing so.

It must not be forgotten that Halpine's own situation was one of great danger. While he was trying to shoot the Ute, the latter could be counted upon to return the attention. True, he had discharged his gun and it was necessary to reload it, before he could turn it to account.

It may not be supposed that a man lying along the side of a galloping horse, with his toe crooked over his spine to hold him in place, and with other pressure necessary at the shoulder of the flying animal, is in a favorable position for placing a charge in his

weapon; and yet many an Indian has done that very thing under just such conditions, and the particular Ute which we have in mind essayed the task which is impossible to ninety-nine out of every hundred horsemen in the country.

Halpine was confident this thing would be done unless prevented, and hence his anxiety to reach his enemy before he could bring his rifle into use. Observing the quartering position of the flying steed, he changed the course of his own animal; but the cunning Ute divined his purpose before he could accomplish it, and it was just as easy for him to make a corresponding change of front and rear.

Infuriated by being repeatedly baffled, the ranchman now headed straight for the fugitive, with the intention of overhauling and bringing him to terms; but his wrath was not diminished at the discovery that Owen Woodward's pony was just as fleet as his own, and that so long as he was under charge of the warrior clinging to his side, like a fly to the wall, he could scorn the attempts of any other of his species to overtake him.

The exasperating feature of this business was that every minute counted in favor of the warrior. He was not only nearing his friends, whither there was no danger of being followed, but he was making progress in reloading his rifle, and, unless prevented, would soon place himself on something like equal terms with his pursuer.

Arkell was so engaged in another direction that he was drawn beyond sight of his comrade.

He was of the opinion that his friend was competent to take care of himself without help from him, so there was nothing to be counted upon from that direction.

It was during this singular flight and pursuit, which was begun and ended in much less time than it takes us to describe it, that the treacherous and shifting character of the moonlight became annoying beyond description.

Halpine held his rifle ready to fire at the first moment he got a chance. His steed see-sawed back and forth in the vain effort to uncover the subtle fugitive, and at the very moment the ranchman was confident he had him "dead to rights," the light of the moon became so dim that he dare not risk the shot, through fear of hitting the pony that was working so energetically for an enemy.

It grew darker and darker, until the horse himself was only dimly seen. Halpine glanced impatiently upward, and saw that a heavier rift of clouds than before was passing in front of the orb of night, but it was of comparatively slight width, and would soon be gone again.

He urged his pony, and, still on the alert, determined to seize the first chance the instant it presented.

When the moonlight was unobstructed once more, the left side of the flying pony was seen to be clear. Halpine drove his steed to the right to give him a view of the other side, or to compel the Ute to flop over the spine of the animal in order to use him still as a shield.

Should he make the attempt, the pursuer meant to catch him on the fly. Should he decline to do so, the Ute would have to change the course of his horse, so that he would no longer be heading in the direction of reinforcements.

But to the astonishment of the cowboy, he noticed that the pony ahead of him was beginning to lag his speed, as though the pace was too great for him.

Thus encouraged, Halpine, instead of forcing his own beast to the other side of the fugitive, headed straight for him.

As if conscious of what was wanted, the splendid pursuer bent all his energies to the task, and speedily placed his rider along-

side the other animal, which continued going slower and slower, until he dropped to a moderate walk.

And it was then that Jim Halpine was surprised.

There was no rider at all on Owen Woodward's pony. The Ute had taken advantage of the temporary obscurity to drop to the ground, where he crouched unnoticed until his pursuer had passed, when, rising to his feet, he whisked off in the darkness.

"Well, I'll be shot!" exclaimed the ranchman, when he comprehended the trick that had been played. "You done that so well that you desärvē to succeed, but you must not come fooling around our cattle any more."

CHAPTER XVII.

A STRANGE RIDE.

Meanwhile, Frank Woodward had his share of stirring adventure.

The emphatic style in which he was unhorsed was enough to knock the breath from any man and endanger his neck. He came to the ground with such violence, that he lay for several minutes senseless, neither Arkell nor Halpine suspecting his predicament. Had he fallen in front of the charging herd, he would have been trampled to death.

"I never knew of a horse that was wanted so badly by the Indians as Owen's, and I don't suppose there is any use of looking for him again," was his thought, as he looked around to take his bearings.

After reflecting upon the situation, Frank wisely decided that the wisest course was to push on in the direction of the camp, where he hoped to find his father and uncle. Recalling the directions given him, he studied the position of the moon and the few stars, and, without difficulty, fixed upon the right course to follow.

He was obliged to limp a little, because of the fall from his horse; but, after walking a short way, this passed off, and he was sure he would be all right by the morrow.

The prairie was more undulating than that passed over before reaching the spot, and he had not gone far when he struck another of the ridges that he had noticed so often through the day. Like the Utes, they were liable to be encountered at any time.

He was descending the other side of this elevation when the first surprise came to him—a surprise that puzzled and caused some fear on his part.

In the stampede of the ranchmen's herd, some of the members had become separated from the rest, and wandered off by themselves. A huge bull had passed over the ridge ahead of Frank, and was glaring around him, as if he, too, had lost his bearings, and did not know what to do about it. He looked up at the lad as he came in sight, and uttered a threatening bellow, possibly by way of inquiry as to whether this young man could furnish him any information.

"I don't know that I can help you," said the lad, amused at the bewilderment of the animal, "but they seem to have forgotten all about you and me."

It is a fact, which may not be generally known in the East, that a man on foot is always regarded with suspicion by a herd of Western cattle. The animals are so accustomed to seeing those in charge of them mounted on horseback, that, when a person is observed on foot, they often show hostility, and it has happened, more than once, that such pedestrians have been compelled to flee for their lives. If they can secure and mount a steed, all danger is ended at once.

It is not improbable that the bull viewed the lad with feelings akin to those named, though the experience through which he had just passed, perhaps tempered the sharpness of his resentment at

the sight of an individual depending wholly on his own means of locomotion.

Be that as it may, the bull, after a second muttering bellow, lowered his head and walked toward Frank, who stood motionless, wondering what it all meant.

"Arkell and Halpine ought to teach you better manners than that," said the youth, hesitating whether to flee or stand his ground.

Now, since he had a loaded Winchester in his hands, it will be seen that Frank really had no cause for alarm; for, if the bull persisted in attacking him, all he had to do was to raise his weapon and shoot him down; but the boy was restrained by a consideration which would not have occurred to every one.

He reflected that this noble and fine-looking animal was the property of his friends, who had shown such kind interest in himself and cousin, and, to shoot him down in his tracks, would entail considerable loss upon them. The stampede was sure to deprive them of a number of valuable beasts, and he hoped he would not be compelled to add to the number.

But it was useless to run, for that was sure to spur the bull into a fiercer attack, and there was no refuge in sight. In the hope that the animal might be frightened off by showing a bold front, Frank threw up his arms, uttered a shout and dashed directly at the creature.

He was sure he was going to succeed, for the bull stopped, raised his head and looked inquiringly at him, doubtless wondering what sort of creature it was he had encountered; but instead of fleeing as Frank expected him to do, he not only held his ground, but at the moment when only a few paces separated them, he again dropped his head and charged the lad.

The astonished youth had no time to fire his gun, but calling into play his dexterity, leaped aside, barely avoiding the formidable horns when they were almost pressed against his chest.

Yielding to an extraordinary impulse, which Frank could not explain, he made a strong leap at the instant he was beside the bull, and somewhat after the manner of the Ute that had displaced him, he landed on the back of the bull.

Before the latter knew what had been done, the boy was astride him, grasping one of his long horns with his left hand, while he held his rifle in his right, and shouted as loud as he could.

"Now go it, old fellow, and show what you can do."

The bull did it and no mistake. Never in all his varied career had he ever been treated in that style. True, during the branding season, a red-hot iron had been pressed against his haunch, but that was altogether a different matter. Here was a young man actually sitting on his spine and with his fingers closed around one of his horns.

The moment the animal took in the whole situation, he emitted a resonant bellow, flung up his tail and away he went.

It was the strangest ride in which Frank Woodward had indulged, and it was hardly begun when he voted himself the biggest kind of a simpleton for having undertaken it. Since, however, it was under way, he grimly resolved to see it through, without a thought of what the end was likely to be.

The bull showed more speed than he anticipated. He reasonably supposed that after his furious fight with the stampeded herd, he would be disposed to take things easily. No doubt such would have been the case, but for the exceptional conditions.

"There's one thing certain," concluded Frank, as he began to grow accustomed to the whistling wind about his face, "you are pushing matters with such a vim that you'll have to put on the brakes before going much further."

The rider had no chance to take his bearings or learn toward what point of the compass his strange steed was carrying him

with such speed; but, deeming it impossible that the course should be the right one, he would not have hesitated to take a flying leap from the perch, but for fear of injury.

He still felt the shock of his fall from his pony, and it seemed to him the bull was tearing ahead with such speed that he could not save himself from a dangerous fall. His conviction that the strength of his charger must soon give out led him to maintain his seat after the belief that it was the worst possible place for him to stay.

"As soon as he lets up a little, I'll slip off, though like enough he'll wheel about and go for me the minute I touch the ground, and I'll be compelled to shoot him after all— Hello!"

To his amazement and alarm, he suddenly became aware that the refuge for which he vainly looked a short time before was in his immediate front. There was a grove of timber only a few rods away, and there could be no question that the bull was heading for the trees with the object of sweeping the terrifying load from his back.

"There's no need of doing that," muttered Frank, seeing his peril, "for I'm willing to get off any time, and I guess I'll do it now."

There was not an instant to wait. True, the maddened animal was still going at his best, but the pace was much less rapid than it seemed to the youth, who, slinging his left leg in front, took the leap, landing on his feet and saving himself from falling by running a number of paces beside the animal.

The latter must have been in such a bewildered state that he did not fully grasp the situation. Instead of wheeling about and charging the young gentleman who had so outraged his feelings, he must have believed that he still had him on his back, and that the moment of vengeance had come.

Straight among the timber he charged with head lowered and tail flying, while a shorter bellow, evidently of exultation, escaped him, at the prospect of ridding himself so summarily of his tormentor.

The savage taurus must have undergone considerable battering as the result of his ardor, for there were limbs and tree trunks in his path, and he did not stop to go around them. Once he collided so violently with a tree that he was brought to a standstill with a suddenness that could not have failed to jar him through and through.

He was prudent enough in his wrath to refrain from attempting to go through this particular trunk, but wheeling slightly to one side, flanked it, and resumed his crashing and tearing with a vigor which speedily landed him on the other side and upon the open prairie again.

It was here that he showed evidence of his knowledge that everything was all right with him once more. The ogre was not on his back, and he was free to follow his own inclinations.

The bull stood a minute or two, as if looking for the daring youth, to finish him; but, seeing nothing of the fellow, again dashed across the plain with flying tail and lowered head, speedily vanishing from sight.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A TERRIFYING DISCOVERY.

Frank's first thought, after pulling himself together, was that, by a strange freak of fortune, his steed had taken him directly to the grove of timber that was his destination. A glance at the moon's location, as well as that of the several stars, by which he had steered his course, proved that this was the fact.

He stood on the edge of the timber, looking around and considering the next step to take.

It was uncertain whether the parties who had kindled the camp-fire were still there; and, more important of all, was it to learn whether they were friends or enemies.

Fortunately his suspense was quickly ended. He was in the act of approaching the trees to make a reconnoissance, as well as to secure shelter from any enemies lurking in the neighborhood, when a well-known voice called out:

"Hello, Frank, is that you?"

"Why, father and uncle!" exclaimed the delighted boy, hurrying forward to greet his friends; "how glad I am to see you!"

"Where is Owen?" asked his parent, as the brothers issued from the grove and stood revealed in the moonlight.

"I hope he is just as safe as we are," was the reply of the lad, who, as promptly as he could, related the facts already known to the reader.

As may be supposed, the men were rendered extremely anxious about the absent youth, and were eager to start to his help, without a moment's unnecessary delay.

It seemed incredible to them that a single boy should be able to hold out so long within the dugout against a strong body of Utes.

The elder hunters explained that they were on their way to the timber, some miles distant, to help the boys in their antelope hunt, when the appearance of a party of Utes compelled them to change their course, and they halted in this place and started the fire for the purpose of letting the boys know where they were, and guiding them to the same refuge. Thus Frank was right in his theory as to the meaning of the camp-fire, whose smoke was visible for a distance of several miles over the prairie.

As soon as it began growing light in the east the ponies were saddled, and Frank took his place behind his father, with the remark that he was becoming accustomed to that manner of riding.

Riding to the nearest elevation, they scanned the surrounding prairie, and were gratified at the sight of Arkell and Halpine approaching at a leisurely pace. To the delight, too, of Frank, it was seen they were leading a third horse, which no doubt was the same animal that had exchanged owners so many times.

The cowboys were soon on the spot, and cordially returned the salutations of the hunters, who hardly needed the introduction which Frank gave.

Arkell explained that they had given the Utes such a trouncing that little was to be feared from another attempt on their part to stampede the cattle. The latter had continued their headlong flight until the small river was reached. Into this they went in such mad haste that a number were drowned. By the time the rest reached the other bank their excitement was cooled off and the stampede was over. They ceased running, and either threw themselves down to rest or began cropping the grass, which was both succulent and abundant.

Arkell stated that after assuring themselves their cattle needed no further attention, he and his companion took a look at the dugout and its surroundings. Since the Utes had learned of the presence of enemies, they were more guarded than usual, and it was impossible on that account to obtain anything like a satisfactory survey; but, so far as they could judge, no change had taken place in the relative situation of the besiegers and besieged.

The cowboys were now as ready and eager as the others to raise the siege and release the lad from his unpleasant quarters.

There were four men and one large boy, all well mounted, armed with Winchester rifles and well qualified to use them. If the besieging Utes had not been reinforced, there were barely more than half a dozen fighting warriors on hand. Brave as most of them undoubtedly were, the forces were too nearly equal for them to maintain their ground, especially as not one owned a re-

peating gun, though, in other respects, their weapons were excellent ones.

Not a minute was thrown away. The dugout was only a few miles distant, and, from the crest of the second ridge, where the little party halted, they caught sight of the odd-looking, squatty structure, which had been the cause of so many stirring occurrences since the preceding day.

Nothing of importance could be detected from this elevation, and the little company were speedily under way again.

At times the dwelling of the cowboys was shut from sight as they galloped forward, but it speedily reappeared, and they finally came to a halt within two or three hundred yards of the place.

Up to this time not a solitary Ute had been seen, nor was a warrior now visible. The men kept a sharp lookout, and gave it as their opinion that the entire party had withdrawn.

Before Arkell and Halpine would permit the impatient friends to approach any closer, they rode entirely around the structure, keeping at a distance. This proceeding convinced them that Big Thunder and his warriors were gone, and the way to the dugout was now open.

Frank Woodward could not restrain his ardor. While riding toward the structure, he swung his hat overhead and gave a loud hurrah. He wondered that his cousin did not answer, but concluded he was asleep.

Before the relatives could reach the spot, Arkell hurried into the place. He was gone only a minute or two, when he was seen to dash out in great excitement.

He met the Woodward on the threshold with the terrifying announcement:

"The boy ain't in there!"

CHAPTER XIX.

WHAT SHALL BE DONE?

For a minute or two all looked in each other's faces, speechless and grief-stricken. The father of Owen was so overcome, that he sat down on the rude bench, and, covering his face with his hands, wept like a child, while the others held a respectful silence.

Halpine finally broke the silence.

"In some way, which I own ain't clear to me, the Utes have made a prisoner of the youngster. Do you agree with me, Amos?" he asked, turning toward his friend, who nodded his head and replied:

"Them's my sentiments."

"The Utes have gone off with him, and all we've got to do is to foller and take the youngster away from 'em."

This indeed was the only course, though every one saw how faint the chances were of success.

The Indians numbered more than they, and were equally well mounted. They had probably started for the Ute villages, which Arkell stated were less than a hundred miles to the northward, and would be reached in the course of two or three days, for Big Thunder and his warriors, apprehending pursuit, were sure to travel fast.

If the Utes were overtaken and compelled to fight, they were sure to slay their captive before allowing him to be retaken, while, if their home was once reached, nothing less than a company of cavalry could bring them to terms.

The conference lasted half an hour, for the reason that Arkell would permit no action until he had made thorough investigation of the immediate vicinity. The conclusion arrived at by him was agreed to by the others.

"The youngster stayed in the dugout an hour or two after Frank

left. Then the idea came to him that his cousin had got through the lines of the varmints, and he made up his mind that there was a chance of his doing the same. So he tried it. He may have got along purty well for a time, but he hadn't the luck of his cousin; the Utes diskivered and made him a prisoner."

"That being the case," said the father of the missing lad, "what do you think followed?"

"From what Frank here told me about that chase to the dugout, it's sartin the Utes wanted to make both prisoners, 'cause if they hadn't, they would have shot 'em down long afore they got here."

"Why didn't they do so, when the pursuers found they had come upon the shelter?" asked the parent of Frank.

"It all took place so sudden-like that the chance wasn't a good one. You can see by the lay of the land that the dugout wasn't noticed by the varmints till the boys had run almost agin' it. That ridge over there shet it from sight. Then, too, the Utes were riding along in a string, and, afore they got it into their heads what was going on, the youngsters was inside."

This theory seemed so reasonable that no one called it in question. Arkell continued:

"They laid their paws on Owen, and have started for their villages with him. We'll foller and perhaps, by riding hard, come up with 'em afore dark."

"And what then?"

"It will be time enough to answer that question when we have to; but I've two idees in my mind."

"Let us hear them, pray."

"If we can manage to get in sight of 'em about dark, and are able to keep it from them, there'll be a chance of making a raid on their camp at night and getting the youngster away from 'em."

"The chances for doing that, howsumever, are mighty slim," added Halpine, "for the varmints will be looking for that very thing, and it's a hard matter to sarcumvent a party of Utes."

"There's no denying what you say, Jim."

"Taking that view, then," said the father of Owen, "what will be your line of action?"

"We'll have to try to buy back the boy; a Ute varmint knows the worth of money as well as a white man, and it may encourage you, Mr. Woodward, to learn that this won't be the first time that Big Thunder has been in that sort of bus'ness."

"That's the most encouraging fact I have learned since the captivity of my poor boy. If the Ute chief is holding Owen for the sake of ransom, he has only to make it known and I will pay his demands, whatever they be."

"It seems to me," added the father of Frank, "that the wiser course by far, is to proceed from the beginning on the theory that the Utes are willing to allow us to ransom the boy. Even if the chance of his rescue offers, it will be much more prudent that we should decline it, since there must be a certain risk to Owen himself, no matter how favorable the outlook appears."

"I am of the same opinion," his brother was quick to say; "it will be far more satisfactory to us, Arkell, if you will act upon this line from the beginning."

"All this is predicted on the theory that my boy is held for the payment of a price; but if such be the case, why have the Utes ridden away? Why did they not stay here and await our coming for the opening of negotiations?"

The quick-witted Arkell was ready with his explanation.

"When the varmints go into that kind of bus'ness, they don't throw away any advantages. It's a good deal in their favor if they are in their own villages or well on their way there, where they have the mountains and woods and wild country at their back,

than down in this open country where everything suits us so much better."

There seemed good logic in this statement, and like others made by the cowboy, it was not disputed by any of his friends.

But all of Arkell's theories only strengthened the conviction of the Woodward brothers that the right and only course to take was the one based on the assumption of purchasing the release of the young captive. The cowboy had little to say in the way of protest, but it was apparent to the rest that he was not favorable to the scheme.

It looked as if he had some other line of policy in mind, though he vouchsafed no explanation.

CHAPTER XX.

THE ROCKY BLUFF.

It was useless to attempt any concealment of the pursuit, as long as the country remained open and comparatively free from timber. Here and there groves of the latter met the eye; but the Utes seemed to have steered clear of them all—proof that their principal object for the time was to get over the ground with the least delay.

An examination of the footprints of the Indian ponies showed they were on a sweeping gallop.

This was the pace of the pursuers, who had no means of knowing whether they were gaining or simply holding their own.

The Woodwards would have preferred to push their animals harder, so as to overtake the Indians as soon as they could; but Arkell, following the unexplained plan in his mind, maintained the same rate for fully four hours without increasing or checking it.

By this time the forenoon was advanced, and the sun well up in the sky. There were few clouds, and the air was bright, crisp, and clear, so that the exercise of riding was pleasant.

But for the uncertainty that weighed down every heart, the jaunt would have been an ideal one.

Only a short way to the right a lot of antelopes were descried, skurrying over one of the ridges; but, though they would have proven exceedingly tempting at another time, no member of the party felt like swerving a foot from their course.

They merely bestowed a glance upon them as the lively game vanished in the distance.

By noon a marked change in the topography of the country was observable. It became more broken and hilly; wood was abundant; several streams were crossed, and the distant peaks of mountains arose to view like snowy clouds resting against the horizon.

It was easy to understand that, in such a region, the Utes possessed tenfold the advantage they could claim further south.

Frank supposed, when noon came, that a halt would be made, but the cowboys continued straight on, as though there was no such thing as hunger or weariness known.

It was not until the afternoon was half gone that they drew rein near a small, running stream, and gave their ponies an opportunity to crop the grass, which was unusually abundant.

No one said anything about food for themselves, and though Frank was sharply hungry, he made up his mind to stand it uncomplainingly as long as the others did.

He said nothing, therefore, but throwing himself on the green-sward, listened eagerly to the words of Arkell and Halpine.

They had little to impart that was new.

They had stuck closely to the trail from the first, and were of the opinion that they had gained considerably upon the Utes, though no signs of the latter had yet been detected, other than the footprints of their horses.

Although the pursuers had maintained a remarkably steady pace, their speed had materially decreased during the last two hours, because of the growing roughness of the country. The ponies had done well, however, and needed the hour's rest given them.

It was noticed that the trail, instead of crossing the stream to which it led, turned to one side and ran parallel to it.

The country was entirely new to the cowboys, but they concluded that the course of the water changed not far off, and the turn by the Utes was for the purpose of keeping out of it, its appearance indicating that it had considerable depth.

After the conversation had continued a short time, the cowboys withdrew to one side and talked a while in tones too low to be overheard by the others. Then Arkell, without a word of explanation to the others, moved off.

The Woodwards were puzzled by his action, but neither was disposed to ask a question until he offered an explanation.

They noticed that, instead of following the trail, he turned to the right, taking a circuitous course among some undergrowth, bushes, grass and boulders, where he soon disappeared from view.

Halpine stood looking in the direction where his friend had vanished several minutes after he was lost to sight. Then he walked back to the group awaiting him, his face anxious and disturbed.

"What's the trouble?" asked Mr. George Woodward, whose anxiety would not allow him to repress his curiosity.

"Well," said Halpine, "me and Amos are not satisfied with the way things look."

"How has the prospect changed since morning?"

The cowboy did not reply for a minute or so. He was standing on his feet and looking up stream. About a quarter of a mile away, a bluff of rocks more than fifty feet high arose from the plain. Though it was impossible to make sure of the course of the stream from that distance, yet all believed that it ran close to the formation, which, curious as it might appear, is not extraordinary in that section of the West.

"Amos doesn't think it's best to ride by that place without getting a peep at it. He's going to have hard work to catch sight of t'other side, but if any one can do it, that man's Amos. Hello!"

A genuine surprise came to the entire party. A large, fine-looking buck had swum across the stream from the other side, and, without seeing the men, had emerged at a point not more than a hundred feet from where Jim Halpine was standing in plain sight. It certainly was a remarkable oversight on the part of the animal, which is generally so wary of all hunters.

The buck, on emerging from the water, stretched his neck forward and shook his sides, sending the spray and moisture flying from him in a shower. Then he caught sight of the men, and, with a snort of terror, whirled short around to dash off.

This was the opportunity for which Halpine was waiting, and, before the game could take a single jump, he drove a bullet behind his shoulder-blade, stretching him lifeless on the ground. He could not have fallen more suddenly had a platoon of soldiers emptied their muskets in his body.

"I'm glad of that," exclaimed Frank, "for I don't think I was ever so hungry in all my life."

"I'm with you," laughed his father, "though it is not so very long since we ate a substantial meal."

Halpine took but a few minutes to cut some choice slices from the body of the buck, which was found in excellent condition. While he was thus engaged the others busied themselves in gathering material for a fire. Within half an hour of the fall of the game, the company were feasting upon him.

A generous piece was broiled for the absent Arkell, and, since there was no knowing when they would gain another chance to partake of food, a small supply was saved against emergencies.

The party had not yet completed their meal when the cowboy who had been away on his little scout emerged from the undergrowth with such suddenness that every one, including Halpine, was startled.

"Hardly expected you yit," laughed the latter.

"But you couldn't have been better prepared for me," replied Arkell, with a laugh, snuffing the air and looking longingly at the savory meat awaiting him.

He fell to at once, and did full justice to the supply.

He would have made no complaint had he been without a morsel to eat for the next twenty-four hours, but this fact did not prevent his enjoying the meal to the full. While eating, he and Halpine exchanged some jests, but the others thought it passing strange that neither made any reference to the business that had taken him in the direction of the rocky bluff. The words of Halpine proved that his errand thither was an important one; but, if there is one prominent virtue among the frontiersmen, it is their power to repress their curiosity at all times.

The subject came up when the meal was finished.

"How did you find things?" inquired Halpine.

"Jes' as I feared," was the reply, and then turning to the others, he added:

"The Utes have set an ambush behind them rocks you see ahead."

This was astounding information, but no one doubted its truth, and Arkell explained further. The halt was not made for the purpose of resting themselves and ponies, for it had been the intention to push on until nightfall, unless the Indians were seen before that time; but both the cowboys were struck by the appearance of the bluff so near the point where the trail trended almost at right angles to the course it had been following so long.

They very much doubted that this change had been made for the purpose of avoiding a crossing of the stream, as was the explanation that first occurred. The rocky bluff offered a most inviting place for a party of Indians to conceal themselves and await the coming of their pursuers, whose approach they must have discovered long before.

The whites had kept closely to the trail from the moment of leaving the vicinity of the dugout. This fact justified the Utes in believing they would continue to do so until a meeting should take place. If they should ride close to the bluffs, as the savages confidently expected, the latter would pour a volley into the party that was likely to empty every saddle.

It was this probability which struck the eyes of the more experienced cowboys, while it was unobserved by the others, and led to the wise decision that they would not ride by the bluff until a view was obtained of the other side.

CHAPTER XXI.

ACROSS THE STREAM.

It was deemed best to leave the trail at once, instead of following it close to the bluff. This would notify the Utes long before the place was reached that their ambush was discovered, or, at least suspected.

Arkell and Halpine were men skilled in the way of the hostiles; but in adopting this course they made a serious mistake, as was learned within the following half hour.

The route chosen by them was so rough and hard to travel, that at more than one point they were compelled to dismount and guide their ponies around the bowlders, and through the dense

undergrowth, but all the time they kept close watch of the rocky bluff, ready for any sudden foray their enemies might undertake.

When they arrived at a point which was as far advanced as the bluff, they changed their course to the left, and began approaching the rocks. There were still so many obstacles in their path that their view was greatly interrupted, and they could not catch sight of the Indians. Finally, Arkell instructed his friends to wait where they were, while he pushed a little further on foot, believing it important to know precisely what conditions they were about to face.

It was this venture which made known the error committed in diverging from the trail, so far away from the point selected for ambush.

He soon came back with the surprising announcement that not a warrior was in sight.

Having been notified of the penetration of their purpose by the whites, the whole band had hastily left. Had the cowboys led their friends close to the rocks, as they might have done without increasing their danger, the distance between the Utes and their pursuers would have been so shortened that the crisis would have been forced upon them before they could withdraw. Now it was postponed indefinitely, with all the advantage on the side of the red men.

It was a bitter disappointment to all concerned, for night was not far off, and the pursuit must practically end with the setting of the sun. However, there was no time lost in useless regrets, and once more mounting their ponies, the pursuers rode to the rear of the bluffs, where the vengeful Utes were gathered only a brief while before.

Here a halt was made for a brief examination of the ground, in the hope of picking up some interesting information bearing upon the subject so dear to all their hearts. The only evidence that could be secured was that at least one of the warriors was wounded, as was proven by the markings left on the ground; but the soil was so hard and rocky that the keenest search could not reveal the imprints of Owen Woodward's shoes.

This fact added to a misgiving felt by the father of the missing lad, though he had not yet given expression to his fear. He doubted whether his boy was with the Utes; and, if not there, the only explanation was that he had been put to death. The antipathy of the Utes to allowing the whites to approach near enough to open communication with them, pointed in the same direction.

Opposed to this distressing theory, was the fact that if Owen had suffered death at the hands of his cruel captors, his body ought to have been found long before.

The parent, as we have said, kept his fears to himself, refraining from mentioning them to his brother, though, if he had done so, he would have been still more afflicted at finding his apprehension fully shared by him.

The trail from the bluff led directly to the river, which, as had been suspected, flowed within a short distance. A scrutiny of the opposite shore showed that the spot was unfavorable for an ambush, such as the bluff offered, and the whites with little hesitation forced their animals into the stream.

As they feared, it was found so deep that the ponies were obliged to swim a short distance before reaching the shallower current on the other side. Nothing was cared, however, for the inconvenience thus caused.

Emerging from the stream, the little party grouped themselves together, while the cowboys gave a few minutes to a careful scrutiny of the trail, respecting which they seemed to have formed a disagreeable suspicion.

Suddenly Arkell straightened up and came back, shaking his head, and looking deeply annoyed.

"What is it now?" asked Hugh Woodward; "we seem to be doomed to all sorts of unpleasant surprises."

"Well," replied the ranchman, with an angry exclamation, "the mischief is to pay; the trail divides!"

"That means the Utes have separated?" asked the astonished George Woodward.

"That's just what it means and nothing else, and there's no telling which party of varmints have got the younker with them!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE LESSER PARTY.

A hasty comparison of views showed that both the cowboys were in favor of dividing. They insisted, with good reason, that when the chances of making a mistake and of doing right were exactly equal, the risk of going wrong was too great to be assumed.

Arkell and Halpine believed that the wounded and dead Indians were with one division, while Big Thunder and those that were well, including young Woodward, were with the other. Could it have been possible to determine which course was taken by the latter, it would have been simplified, but it will be seen also, that such knowledge was beyond the power of the pursuers, except as it should be gathered, after pressing the pursuit a considerable distance further.

Little more could be done before the morrow, since the day was far advanced, but the ranchmen formed their arrangements with their usual promptness and decision. It was agreed, as a matter of course, that Arkell should lead one party and Halpine the other. To the former were to be attached Hugh Woodward and his son Frank, while the parent of Owen was to go with Halpine.

This arrangement resulted in the formation of two frightfully weak parties, and, if the Utes should take it into their heads to turn upon either, the result could not fail to be disastrous. But it must not be forgotten that the hope of both the Woodwards was to secure the captive boy by means of ransom instead of by strategy.

A dozen seemingly insurmountable obstacles could be named in the way of success, but this could be done no matter what course was adopted, and it was useless to speculate what the outcome of the extraordinary business would be.

Arkell and Halpine agreed as to the probability that the separation of the Utes would prove only a temporary expedient, and that it would be found before the trails progressed far, that they reunited. All ardently hoped that such would be the case, for the pursuit to the bluff proved what no one had dared to believe, that the whites progressed considerably faster than the fugitives.

This must have been due to the wounded and dead warriors that were carried by the Utes, rather to any superiority on the part of the ponies of our friends. The division of the Utes, on the plan named by Arkell, would enable one of the parties to show much greater speed than it had yet done.

The separation of the whites was a matter of such momentous importance that the cowboys insisted on the fullest understanding before it took place.

It was agreed that if either party made any discovery, or attained a success or position which required the presence of the others, it was to be signaled by three shots in quick succession, such as any one of the party could fire with his Winchester.

Of course it might be that the pursuers would be so far from each other that the reports of their guns could not be heard. In that case the task was simply for each division to do its best, and leave the rest to Providence.

Arkell made known a fact for the guidance of the others; Big

Thunder could speak English well enough to hold an intelligible conversation in it, and it was quite likely that others of his warriors could do equally well. Consequently, if a chance was gained to speak to the chieftain, it would be easy enough to make him understand what was wanted.

It took much less time than would be supposed to reach all the understanding required, and then, in deference to the wishes of the Woodwards, both parties resumed their pursuit.

The trail taken by Arkell and his two companions followed the course of the stream, while that assumed by Halpine and George Woodward led away from the water, and directly back into the country. Unless there should be found a convergence of the paths before long, those who followed them would be so far apart that nothing less than the discharge of cannon would serve as signals.

"Now," said Halpine, when he and the afflicted parent were out of sight of the others, "I needn't tell you that we're on the tickliest kind of bus'ness you ever undertook."

"No one can understand that better than I," replied Mr. Woodward, who had learned to control his emotion, "and I need not tell on my part how deeply I appreciate the interest you and Arkell have shown in my trouble."

"Let that pass; all you have to do is to keep your eye wider open than ever before. I'll do the same, but the time is coming when we'll need about five hundred pairs of eyes."

As the horsemen drew away from the stream in which they received considerable wetting, the roughness of the surface decreased to that extent that traveling became quite easy for their ponies.

To the north a range of mountains loomed to view in the gathering twilight, which could not have been more than a mile distant. Sweeping around to the westward, they obtruded across the course of our friends. It followed, therefore, that unless this was changed, the mountain range must be entered on the morrow.

Halpine gave it as his belief that the Ute villages lay just to the northward of the range, instead of being so far off as Arkell supposed. He said it was a favorite custom with the Western tribes to interpose such a barrier between them and the more settled portions from which danger was likely to come.

Such being the fact, the force of the declaration of the ranchman that the Utes were eager to reach the vicinity of their villages before arranging for the ransom of the captive, will be appreciated by the reader.

As the couple neared the mountainous section, the ground once more became broken with boulders and stunted undergrowth, affording such a favorable place for ambush that all the caution of which the cowboy had spoken was needed to prevent them from running into the very peril that had been avoided with such skill at the rocky bluff beside the stream.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THREE RIFLE REPORTS.

Halpine, the cowboy, had little to say as he and his companion rode slowly over the broken country in the direction of the mountains that had gradually faded from view in the gathering darkness.

It was a time not for words, but for vigilance. Woodward wondered how his companion was able to keep on the trail, when the way was so rough that many detours were necessary, and the gloom rendered it impossible to see the ground distinctly. When he ventured to express that wonder, the ranchman told him he was not sticking to the path, but only sought to follow its general course; to do otherwise would be to tempt fate.

When darkness had deepened to that extent that the vision could not penetrate more than fifty feet, Jim silently halted his pony and spoke in a whisper:

"You observed that stretch of timber off to the left afore it got too dark to see, I s'pose?"

"I remember it distinctly."

"It's in there, 'cording to my idee, that the Utes have gone into camp."

"They're not far off, then?"

"No, they're mighty close; we could have catched up with 'em easy enough, but I held back on purpose, so they shouldn't see where we meant to go into camp. You know they've larned that we're up to many of their tricks, and they ain't going to catch us by digging a hole for us to tumble into it."

"What do you think is their plan?"

"That depends; if you and me are follering Big Thunder's party, why, they'll be apt to turn about and look for us; but if it's them that has the dead and wounded, they don't want to be bothered with us. When they find we've stopped for the night, they'll push on and try to get over so much ground afore daylight that it won't be worth our while to try to catch 'em."

"Then it depends upon which party is in front of us?"

"Exactly."

"Which do you suspect is the party?"

"I've an idee that it's the one with them that's been hurt, and Amos thinks the same; but we may be wrong."

Halpine now directed attention to the dense growth of wood and undergrowth in front of them. It assumed a jungle-like appearance, offering an inviting place for camp. He stated that if the small party of Utes which they were following should halt on their journey, for the purpose of waiting until morning, that there was the place where the pause would take place.

"Since we have proof that they know of our coming," suggested Mr. Woodward, "won't they watch to see where we go into camp with a view of paying us a visit before daylight?"

The ranchman replied that such was doubtless the intention of the red men, and it therefore became himself and companion to take precautions to prevent such a disaster as was quite sure to follow the discovery. It was now so dark that the Utes could not locate the two horsemen until they started a fire; but they would conclude that they would keep to the course they were following at the moment they were last in sight; and, if the whites knew no better than to act on this theory, it would not be difficult for the Utes to hunt them out, even if our friends refrained from starting a blaze.

Now that night was fully come, the ranchman made an abrupt turn to the left, and pushed on for several hundred yards, by which time they had penetrated so far that it seemed impossible to go any further. Rocks, boulders, and undergrowth were so dense in every direction that the ponies were well tired out, and showed by their manner that the halt was welcome to them.

No water was within reach, and the grass was so scant that there was little use in the animals trying to nibble a supper. The saddles were removed, and the riders, seating themselves upon one of the largest boulders, awaited the next development in the strange series of adventures upon which they had entered.

It would have been a waste of time for the couple to maintain their position through the long night before them, while, in the nervous, apprehensive state of the stricken parent, the wait would have been almost unbearable. Halpine stated his intention of making a reconnoissance to learn whether the Utes had gone into camp near them, or whether they were pushing along the trail toward their villages to the northward.

Mr. Woodward was glad to be told this, for he saw the impor-

tance of such knowledge. He agreed to keep a close watch during his absence, which Halpine promised should not be extended. The information he wanted ought to be secured within an hour at the most.

It was fortunate for the father when he was left alone that he kept his ears open, for he heard a slight rustling among the undergrowth nearby, which placed him on the alert at once.

Recalling what the ranchman had said about the probable action of the Utes, he concluded that one of the warriors was near. He had returned to learn where the whites had halted, in order that the two might be cut off.

Woodward slid noiselessly off the boulder and crouched to the ground.

He was looking intently in the direction of the faint noise, which he heard again, when the head and shoulders of a Ute warrior arose over the edge of the huge boulder immediately in front. The savage was evidently searching for the men or animals, having seen nothing of the ranchman who had eluded him.

Woodward's situation was such that he could have shot his dusky enemy without danger to himself; but to do so, would have done violence to his feelings. Though he knew the warrior was a foe, he had not yet molested him nor attempted to run off the animals. The sentinel preferred to wait until there was more justification for resorting to extremities.

Whether the Ute obtained the knowledge for which he was seeking can never be known, for, while the white man was watching him as best he could in the darkness, he vanished as noiselessly as he came.

Rather singularly, neither of the ponies showed any alarm, as the animals generally do on the approach of a stranger. This was also fortunate, since it added to the presumption that the red man had not discovered them.

He certainly had come very near doing so, and possibly he had succeeded, and was now on his way to inform his brother warriors of the important fact.

Less than ten minutes passed after the departure of the dusky scout, when Mr. Woodward was startled by a sound precisely like that which alarmed him in the first place.

"He has come back to finish his job," thought the listener.

Before, however, a glimpse could be caught of the intruder, a guarded whistle fell upon his ear. He recognized it as that of Halpine, for whose return he did not yet look. The call was answered, and the next minute the ranchman was beside him.

Mr. Woodward related the particulars of the visit of the Ute, and asked his friend what it meant.

"He was looking for you that he might go back and tell the rest of the varmints where to find you."

"Do you believe he located our camp?"

"I'm sartin of it."

"Then we must hurry off, Halpine, or they will return before we can save ourselves."

"I think not," said the cowboy in a low voice.

"I am sure the risk is too great to wait even a few minutes; his camp can't be far off."

"There ain't any risk," added Halpine, "I met the Ute on his way back to camp!"

Mr. Woodward caught the point of this statement and said no more about it.

"But tell me," he added, "what did you learn?"

"Well, I crept up as near as I could; I got a good view of the camp, and seen the varmints; they had several wounded and dead bodies with 'em, but Big Thunder isn't there."

"And what of my boy? Tell me that!"

"He isn't there, either—of course not; I knowed he wouldn't be with the weaker party."

"Do you believe, Halpine, that he is with the other?" asked the distressed parent.

"Well, I hope so, but I can't tell. Hello!"

At that moment three quick reports of a rifle struck their ears, fairly bringing both to their feet; for it was the signal from Arkell, calling them to join him without delay.

CHAPTER XXIV.

STRANGE PROCEEDINGS.

There could be no mistaking the signal, which had evidently been made by Arkell, who was not as far from the couple as they had supposed.

"Let's go to them at once," said Mr. Woodward, greatly agitated.

"That's what we will do," remarked his companion, "for there can't be any doubt that it's what Amos means."

The unwilling ponies were made to rise to their feet, and the saddles were replaced. The men did not remount, but, leading their animals by the bridles, began picking their way back to the narrow, deep stream crossed at sunset.

In a few minutes the other side was reached, and they started up the right bank of the stream. Both now rode their steeds, and at intervals the ranchman dismounted and examined the ground to make sure they were not off the path. The prints of the animals' hoofs were so plainly marked, that the task was found easier than would be supposed. The Utes proved their knowledge of the country through which they were making their way, by choosing a course that was much better than that taken by the other division.

The reports of the gun enabled Halpine to settle in his mind the spot where he ought to find his friends, provided they had not changed their position. He did not reply to the summons, for he deemed it unnecessary.

"This is about the place," he remarked, when they arrived at the edge of some timber, more open than any they had yet encountered.

"You have the means of calling to your friends—why not try it?"

Halpine adopted the suggestion by emitting a guarded, tremulous whistle, sounding like the call of some night bird.

To the disappointment of both no reply was received, though the call was repeated several times.

"They ain't where they was when that gun was fired," remarked Halpine, whose pony moved forward again at a slow walk, closely followed by that of his companion.

They had gone less than a hundred yards, when another halt was made. Before the ranchman could repeat the signal, uttered a few minutes before, both he and his friend caught the twinkle of a light ahead.

"Sh!" whispered Halpine, "somebody's there, but whether it's our folks or the varmints I don't know."

Woodward consented to remain where he was, while his more experienced friend dismounted and went forward to investigate.

Halpine was prepared for surprises at any time, but that which met his eye caused him no little bewilderment.

He advanced only a short way among the trees when he found himself approaching a camp-fire, burning so brightly that its light was diffused to a considerable distance in every direction. The first form that caught his eye, however, was that of a Ute Indian, standing erect and evidently talking with some person.

The position of the warrior was such that his body screened

the other, the two being in exact line with the mystified ranchman. If there were other individuals near, they must be seated on the ground, and were hidden from sight by the intervening undergrowth.

Halpine paused, expecting the couple in whom he was interested to shift their places, so as to permit a view of the one shut from sight; but, singularly enough, the change did not take place, and he became impatient.

He now began circling to the right with the purpose of solving the vexing question. He believed that instead of approaching the camp of his friends, as he had hoped, he had drawn near that of the stronger party of Utes. It must be that the whites were in the vicinity, and it would seem that the reports of Arkell's Winchester ought to have made that fact known to their enemies.

The ranchman had hardly started on his course when the Indian took a step forward and to one side, which not only revealed his *vis-à-vis*, but allowed the glow of the camp-fire to strike his face, and bring out the features in strong relief.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" muttered the astounded Halpine, "but that beats everything!"

Well might he utter the exclamation, for he recognized the Indian as Big Thunder, the famous war chief of the Utes, while the individual with whom he was talking was Amos Arkell.

What had brought about this strange situation was more than the amazed Halpine could imagine. As yet, he was uncertain whether his friend was in the camp of the Utes or *vice versa*. It looked as if the former was the case.

If such were the fact, Arkell was likely to be in need of the help of Halpine, whose eyes flashed as he compressed his lips and muttered.

"It looks as if Amos has put his foot in it, but I'll stand by him to the end."

With the same noiseless stealth he had shown from the first, the ranchman resumed his advance upon the camp. He was thus engaged when Big Thunder and Arkell quietly seated themselves on the ground, as if to converse at their ease. The tops of their heads were barely visible, while it seemed strange that no one else was in sight.

A little nearer approach, however, brought the explanation. The reason why Halpine saw no other person was because Arkell and Big Thunder were the only ones present.

This was an extraordinary condition of affairs, and he hesitated whether to approach closer until he learned the reason for the two leaders being alone by the camp-fire.

The natural inference was that Arkell and Big Thunder had met on what might be called neutral ground, though such territory is hardly supposable where American Indians are concerned. If such were the fact, it was of importance to learn where the rest of the Utes and whites were located.

Halpine had paused and was trying to catch some of the words that were passing between his friend and the chief of the Utes, when a slight disturbance at his side caused him to turn his head like a flash. He was determined not to be caught off his guard.

"Sh! it is I," whispered a voice, which could belong to no one but a friend.

"Who are you?" demanded the ranchman, with his hand on his knife.

"Frank Woodward," was the reply, as the youth made his way to his side.

"What in the mischief is getting into everybody and everything?" asked the man, impatiently; "I never saw such goings on. Where's the folks?"

"Only a little way to the left among the trees."

"Where are the rest of the varmints?"

"I don't know, but I don't think they're far off."

"Do you know who that is that's talking to Amos?"

"I never heard his name, but it's plain enough that he's a Ute warrior."

"He's more than that; he's Big Thunder, the chief. Where did he come from?"

"I presume the rest of his party are encamped nearby, though I can't say precisely where."

"Then you folks started that fire, did you?"

"Yes; we kindled that. It was Arkell's idea, though father and I thought it unwise. It had been burning only a little while, when Arkell started off to hunt for the Utes, who, he believed, were in the neighborhood. He hadn't been gone five minutes, when he fired his gun three times in quick succession. I suppose that is what brought you and uncle this way?"

"Of course; we wouldn't have come if it hadn't been for that."

"Well, we were puzzled to know why Arkell discharged his rifle, though we knew he must have had good reason for it. He didn't return to explain to us, and father and I felt very anxious, for we knew the Utes were not far off."

"While we were considering what we should do—if, indeed, we could do anything—Arkell walked back to camp, and with him was that chief, who you say is Big Thunder."

"Did Amos bring him as a prisoner, or was Amos the prisoner, or wasn't it either way?"

"I cannot answer that, but so far as I can judge, neither one was under restraint."

"Didn't Amos explain?"

"Not a word; he just asked father and me to move back in the darkness beyond hearing. He said he had something to say to the Ute which couldn't be said while any one else was around. Of course father and I did as requested, and were waiting out among the trees at the time you came between us and the firelight and I recognized you. Father is only a little way off; where is uncle?"

"I left him a short distance back. When we caught sight of the firelight, I told him to wait till I found out what it meant, and I haven't found out anything yet, but I'll be hanged if I don't," added the ranchman, rising upright, and striding straight toward the spot where Amos Arkell and Big Thunder were holding their strange interview.

CHAPTER XXV.

OWEN'S FLIGHT.

Owen, who had been left alone in the dugout, was having plenty of adventures of his own in the meantime.

Big Thunder, who had tried to get into the cabin, having failed to persuade the lad to admit him, withdrew, and he was left alone.

Returning to his buffalo robe, he lay down, with no disposition to sleep, but with his thoughts intensely active. It was hard to remain quiet and idle when there seemed a fighting chance, as it may be called, for his life.

"I'll try it!" he suddenly exclaimed, springing to his feet. "I believe I shall succeed; but if I fail, it will save my folks from running a risk that is likely to prove fatal to them."

With a prayer to Heaven for protection, the youth removed the heavy wooden bolt and then lifted the latch. The door was set at a few inches, so that if he should find it necessary to make a hurried retreat, there would not be an instant's delay in obtaining entrance again.

He waited a few minutes in front of the opening, using his eyes and ears for all that was in them. The signs were still fa-

vorable, and, conscious that there was no time to throw away, he imitated Frank, and, dropping on his hands and knees, began crawling forward, with his body as close as possible to the ground.

He remembered that the last glimpse he had of Frank showed him moving in a direct line from the dugout. Instead of imitating him, Owen bore to the left.

Fully a hundred yards were passed in safety, though he was startled more than once by sounds of danger. He heard the tramp of horses' hoofs, the guttural voices of Indians, and noises as if made by men running back and forth.

With no idea of the point toward which he was tending, Owen now carefully arose to his feet, and, in a crouching posture, moved more rapidly over the prairie than before. He glanced right and left, and felt a shuddering fear at the discovery that the moon was just rising above the rim of the horizon. Like his cousin, he had no thought that the hour was so late, and it is safe to say that had he known it, he would have stayed in the dugout.

In fact, he hesitated, half inclined to turn about and hasten back, for it seemed no longer possible to elude the Utes, who had permitted him to advance thus far without molestation.

But, before he could carry out the half-formed intention, a singular cry came from the vicinity of the dugout. More properly there were several of them, not loud enough to be heard very far, but they reached his ear with startling distinctness.

"They have found out that I have left!" was the conclusion of the lad, who now realized that there was no going back. He must advance, whatever the result.

The sound of tramping feet, the angry signals and the increasing light of the moon, all warned him of the fearful peril in which he stood.

With no thought except to get as far from the dugout as possible, he broke into a run, which continued until he found himself on the margin of a stream fringed with stunted undergrowth.

It was the same water, where most of the ponies, including his own, were tethered, and which were visited by the daring ranchman Arkell, a short time afterward. But Owen had struck it at a point so far to the left of the scene of Arkell's exploit, that he saw nothing of the animals or their guards.

Owen breathed with something like relief, when he found himself near even such a slight shelter as that afforded by the sparse vegetation which served Arkell so well. He thought it possible that he might still get away, provided he had not been observed in his hurried flight across the plain.

Crouching behind the grass and bushes, he lay flat on his face and peered toward the dugout.

The increasing light of the moon revealed the outlines of the old structure, though the view was too dim to discern any moving figures near it.

But to his horror he discerned a couple of figures flitting between him and the building. Their growing distinctness proved they were nearing the spot where he was hiding.

Within a few seconds, the shadowy forms resolved themselves into a couple of Ute warriors, walking side by side without speaking, but with every appearance of being upon earnest business.

Owen would have shifted his position, despite the risk of being detected, for the warriors were moving directly upon him, but, before he could carry out his intention, he observed two other figures aiming for a point to his right.

Then he made a start to the left; but to his consternation, he heard the grunting of voices in that direction.

It began to look as if he were about to be surrounded.

The terrified youth wondered whether it would pay him to take

to the water. The stream did not seem to be broad, and he knew nothing of its depth.

Whatever was done must be done without delay, and he hesitated.

His doubt was caused by observing that the water reflected the moonlight so much more distinctly than the land, that he was sure to be detected before he could swim a dozen strokes.

As the only thing possible, he lay flat on his face behind the fringe of vegetation, hoping and praying that the Utes, who were coming steadily and swiftly toward him, would turn to the right or the left, or fail to search the spot where it cannot be said he was half concealed.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PUSHING NORTHWARD.

Several minutes of cruel suspense followed. The different Utes seemed to converge to the point where the poor youth was lying as flat as he could, and wishing it were possible to force himself into the ground itself.

Owen wondered why it was they were so long in finding him, for since he plainly saw each warrior, it would appear that they ought to have been equally quick in detecting him.

It was not long, however, before the humiliating truth dawned upon him. The red men had seen him probably from the first; at any rate they observed his hasty flight to the stream, and, feeling sure of his capture, they dallied a while with him, as a cat sometimes plays with a mouse before crunching it in her jaws.

Owen's heart steadily sank from the moment he found his flight cut off, and it reached zero when Big Thunder deliberately kicked him with his moccasin and grunted:

"Hooh! white boy won't let Big Thunder come in, so he come out to shake hands with Big Thunder! Howdy do?"

And the grim chieftain mockingly extended his hand to Owen, who, feeling that it was all up with him, gingerly arose to his feet, and with drooping head, extended his hand to the triumphant Ute, while the others grinned and looked on.

"Hooh!" continued Big Thunder, "don't run fast—run faster—den Ute won't catch him—where oder boy?"

"He slipped out of the cabin some time ago," replied Owen, feeling a flush of pride that one of them, even though it was not himself, had outwitted the dusky miscreants.

"Where he go?" asked the chief with undisguised interest.

"He went to bring our friends to drive you away."

"Hooh! why you no go wid him?"

"I didn't think there was as much chance for two as for one."

"Why you not wait till your friends come and drive Ute off?"

"Because I was a fool!" was the rather emphatic reply of Owen, whose self-disgust warranted this emphatic condemnation of himself.

The remark seemed to please the Utes, especially Big Thunder, who grinned more than he had yet done.

There were four warriors beside the chieftain surrounding the youth, who, therefore, was without the slightest hope of escape, except through the intervention of powerful friends. Big Thunder, while pleased over his success, was chagrined that one of the boys whom he was so anxious to secure had got away. He evidently thought there was still hope of securing the other.

"When oder boy leave?" he asked, speaking the English tongue with more facility than is generally heard among his people.

"He went a long time ago," was the truthful reply of Owen; "too long for you to follow him; he is a good way off, and I hope he will soon be back with our friends."

And Owen looked longingly toward the rising moon, as if he really expected the appearance of the absent ones.

Whether or not the chief believed the reply, he was shrewd enough to take a cue from it. He spoke to two of the warriors in his own tongue, and they immediately moved off at a loping trot in the direction of the glance of the captive. The heart of the latter sank at the thought that possibly he had given knowledge to his enemies, which might end in the recapture of Frank.

Big Thunder now indulged in some general inquiries, as they may be called. Owen's sense of truthfulness and honor would not permit him to tell a falsehood, though he saw that it might help him materially could he make his captors believe a strong party of white men were in the neighborhood.

The chief asked Owen by whose permission he was hunting on the grounds of the Utes. The reply to this was that he thought the Indians ought not to object to the sport of himself and three friends, since it was impossible for them to slay enough antelope or other kind of game to affect the inexhaustible supply.

Big Thunder reminded the youth that the land belonged to them, and that, if the game were killed off, nothing would be left to keep the red men and their families from starving. The Utes had submitted to seeing their treaties broken by the white men, until in self-defense they had roused themselves and were determined to slay every trespasser upon their property.

In an argument of this nature it was impossible for Owen Woodward to maintain his position, and perhaps he was wise in admitting the force of the chieftain's statements.

How much longer the curious conversation would have lasted, it is impossible to say. Big Thunder having sent out several of his warriors to hunt for the other boy, evidently was content to wait where he was until their return.

Before that could take place, however, the single Indian left in charge of the horses put in an appearance with a disquieting report. A white man had just made off with the horse of the captive after administering a blow to the sentinel which he could never forget. Indeed, great as is the stoicism of the American race, this particular specimen held one hand to his face and comported himself in a way that left no doubt of the rough manner in which he had been handled by the daring ranchman.

Owen listened to the account in wonderment, with no suspicion of what it was all about, for the words uttered in explanation were in an unknown tongue to him. He saw that what the warrior said caused considerable excitement to Big Thunder, who uttered some sharp commands, and then emitted a call meant as a signal to the rest of the warriors to gather about him.

He issued orders, and the horses were quickly brought to the spot. Meanwhile the two who had been sent to look for Frank returned empty-handed. While this was going on, the chief took Owen's rifle from him. The old fellow carefully examined it in the moonlight, and was highly pleased with his prize. He had seen the repeating Winchesters before, and he knew their value. He had long wished to possess one, but this was the first opportunity, and it need not be said that he appropriated the weapon without a compunction of conscience.

It required only a few minutes for the Utes to complete their preparations for leaving. The two lifeless warriors were placed on the backs of ponies, each being supported in position by a Ute, who sat astride the animal behind him. The one that was wounded needed no such help.

This arrangement left two steeds without riders. Owen supposed, as a matter of course, that one of these would be allotted to him, but, to his disappointment, he was compelled to mount behind Big Thunder, who gave him the privilege of carrying his discarded weapon, while he retained his grasp on the valuable Winchester of Owen.

Several hours of night remained, when the Utes, heading northward, set out on their return to their villages, which, as Arkell had declared, lay beyond the range of mountains, which were in plain sight when the sun was shining and the sky clear.

That the band was in a hurry to leave was proved by the fact that, despite the sorrowful burden they carried with them, they struck their ponies into a brisk gallop which was not interrupted

for fully an hour. By that time the ground became so rough that the wounded Indian, with all his heroism, could not stand it, and those in charge of the slain warriors were hardly less distressed. The pace, therefore, became a walk, which continued until after the sun appeared in the horizon.

The moment it was fairly light a halt was made, and Big Thunder, accompanied by one of his warriors, rode to the top of the nearest elevation, from which he gazed back in the direction of the dugout. Owen had no means of telling whether he discovered anything interesting, but concluded, from the manner of the chieftain, that he saw nothing to cause disquiet.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A MEETING.

Owen Woodward thanked his stars more than once that he was thoughtful enough to eat of the remains of the dinner which he and his cousin found in the dugout. The Utes were so accustomed to going without food for more than a day at a time that the captive would have suffered severely but for his preparation before starting on his long ride northward.

Big Thunder appeared to be satisfied with the outlook to the southward, for when they moved onward again, it was at a moderate pace. Had it been otherwise, our friends who were in pursuit would have found much difficulty in overtaking them, because of the several hours' start obtained by the red men.

There was little to interest the lad during the forenoon and the early part of the afternoon.

The chieftain seemed to have talked himself out, so far as Owen was concerned, at their first meeting in the nighttime; for whatever he said afterward was addressed to his warriors, instead of to the captive, who would have welcomed anything in the nature of a conversation, since he might have gathered an inkling as to the intentions of the Utes concerning himself.

It was toward the close of the day that the party arrived at the rocky bluff, which has already been described.

There they made their halt on the northern side, while one of their number climbed to the top, and cast a searching glance over the many miles of country lying to the south.

It was easy to understand from his excited words and manner, when he descended, that he had caught sight of the party of whites that were following them.

Big Thunder instantly disposed of his warriors so as to provide a deadly ambush, provided the horsemen were thoughtless enough to ride into it.

At intervals, the same warrior that had climbed the top made his way thither again, and came down with his report. He might have made it known without leaving his perch, but the Utes were now acting with the most extreme caution, and took no chances that could be avoided.

No stronger proof can be given of the skill of Amos Arkell than was shown by the fact that he was able to make his reconnaissance undetected by the Ute lookout on the top of the bluff.

Owen was mystified when the sudden order came from Big Thunder to start the party forward again. He did not understand its full meaning, nor why the company divided, one taking a certain course, while Big Thunder and four of his best men continued up the stream, the youth still keeping his place behind the chieftain on his steed.

Whatever it might mean, however, it showed that the dreaded ambushade had been postponed, and the grateful lad uttered a prayer of thankfulness that his friends had escaped.

Big Thunder pushed along the stream for some time after dark, when the party halted. The place chosen was so inclosed by rocks, vegetation, and bowlders that they appeared safe against discovery, so long as they used ordinary prudence.

During all this long ride not a member of the party ate a mouthful of food. Owen knew not how long their abstinence had lasted, but it seemed to him that none of them had had a chance to dine since their first appearance near the grove of timber on the preceding afternoon.

In crossing the streams he noticed that Big Thunder and some of the warriors scooped up the water in the palms of their hands, and slaked their thirst. He imitated them, so there was no lack for drink, but he was never so hungry in his life.

He supposed, as a matter of course, that now, since the halt was made, something would be produced in the way of food; but he was woefully disappointed. Although a small fire was started, yet

there were no signs that it was to be put to any use other than to enliven the gloom and furnish a moderate degree of warmth.

The warriors brought forth their pipes, filled them with tobacco, and having lighted them, sat down as though no sensation of delight could equal that produced by the nicotine. The ponies were left a short distance off, where they could not have fared as well as their stolid owners, for there was no grass to be cropped and the nearest water was the stream, a good half mile distant.

But it was not the intention of Big Thunder to spend the night in this fashion. He allowed one of the warriors to smoke but a minute, when he ordered him to take his station near the animals. The lesson of the night before was not forgotten.

Hardly waiting for his departure, the chieftain said something to the others, when he vanished also, though in a different direction. He had set out to look for the white men, whom he knew were on his trail and at no great distance.

Now it so came about that, at the very moment Big Thunder was stealthily making his way over the back trail, Amos Arkell was advancing with the same care in the opposite direction. It followed, therefore, that a meeting between them was among the certainties of the near future, with the advantage on the side of him who was the first to discover the advance of the other.

Fortune this time favored the ranchman. His keen hearing apprised him of the approach of some one from the front. Whoever it might be, he knew it was a Ute, and he was as good as certain it was Big Thunder himself. This chief had a way of assuming such dangerous duty, that was well known to the ranchman, who now guided his own line of action on the presumption that the leader of the Utes was making his way toward him.

Arkell remained as motionless as the bowlder beside him, until the chieftain, guided apparently by fate, was so near that the white man could have touched him by stretching out his hand. It was then he learned of his peril by hearing the click of a revolver, as the hammer was drawn back and the muzzle almost shoved against his nose.

The moonlight would have revealed all this before but for the deep shadow of the surrounding vegetation. Before the startled chief could withdraw or take any precaution, Arkell said, in a voice which could not have been heard over a dozen feet off:

"I've got you, Big Thunder! If you start to run, or try to call any of your warriors, or make a move to hurt me, I'll shoot you dead!"

The chieftain's knowledge of the English language left no room for the misconception of this threat, which was fittingly punctuated by the clicking of the revolver that caught his ear but a second or two before.

"What white man want—hooh?" he asked, without the slightest tremor in his tones, though the grim old Ute must have felt as terrified as one of his race can feel.

"You must walk back with me to my camp-fire. If you go along without trouble, you won't be hurt; but, at the first move, I'll shoot."

"What white friend want?" asked Big Thunder, afraid to refuse to heed such a positive order.

"I've got some business with you. Come right along, for I'm in a hurry."

Judging from the looks of things, Frank Woodward was mistaken in believing there was no restraint on the part of either of these individuals.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CONCLUSION.

It is safe to say that Big Thunder, the Ute chieftain, had much more faith in Arkell, the ranchman, than the latter had in him.

It can be understood, therefore, that when he was given the choice of marching back to the camp-fire or be shot, he accepted the former recourse with such promptness that those who saw them emerge from the gloom were warranted in believing there was no compulsion about it.

All the same, however, the Ute was as much in the power of the ranchman as though the latter held him bound hand and foot.

Now no one would suppose that the conversation between the two could possibly relate to any subject whatever except the young man who was held captive by the Utes—but such was not the fact.

There are few situations without a tinge of humor or absurdity, and the one before us was not an exception.

The ranchman sent his friends beyond hearing, and then he and the Ute chieftain began a quarrel, not about Owen Woodward, but about their own affairs.

Arkell was angry at the attempt to stampede his herd of cattle, and reminded Big Thunder of his promise, made a year previous, that he would not allow his warriors to molest the property of the two ranchmen, provided the latter presented him with a pony every year. Arkell had sent two ponies already, and the chieftain rode one of them that very day. The white man naturally demanded an explanation of such conduct on the part of the leader of the Utes.

The latter replied that he gave no order for the stampede, and the parties who undertook it were unconnected with his company. He promised to call the offending warriors to account when he should reach the Ute villages. Since the chief had no more men with him than when besieging the dugout, it looked as if there was a grain or two of truth in what he said.

Big Thunder insisted still further that everything done by him was aimed against the strangers that had entered upon his hunting grounds without permission. They numbered two full-grown and two young men, and he intended to punish them for their intrusion. He reminded the ranchman that his dugout had not been harmed, the Utes only striving to get possession of the two strangers inside.

The white man, had he expressed his thoughts, would have said that the reason the red men did not destroy the structure was because they had not the power to do so. However, he thought it prudent to give the rogue the benefit of seeming belief in his statement, but he inquired about the attempted ambush at the rocky bluff, a short distance behind them.

Big Thunder was ready with the declaration that that also was directed against the other three whites who were known to be in the company of Arkell and Halpine. The intention was to wipe them out, but to leave the others unhurt.

In an interview of the kind we are describing, there is always a great deal of so-called "diplomacy," which is a courteous way of saying that candor and truth are greatly lacking. Arkell knew that if he and his friend had run into the ambush, they would have shared the fate of their companions. The Ute leader was now speaking with a "double tongue," his statements being too preposterous for a moment's belief.

Such being the case the ranchman did not hesitate to draw a stupendously long bow himself. He even went to the extent of declaring that the four white men had come into the Platte country on his express invitation. He meant after their arrival, to seek out Big Thunder and obtain his permission for them to engage in a hunt for antelope; but on their way thither, the lads had been tempted to fire at one or two animals, intending to offer an explanation when they arrived at the dugout. These white men were, Arkell's close relatives and he was ready to defend them with his life.

It is hardly probable that Big Thunder placed any more reliance on the statement of the ranchman than the latter did upon what he had heard from him; but, if so, he was politic enough to suppress all evidence of lack of faith.

Arkell now came to the point with the demand that the white lad in the possession of Big Thunder should be restored to his friends. The chief replied that he would take the night to think of it, and let him know his decision in the morning.

"No, you won't," replied the ranchman, with a flash of his eye.

"Yes, me do so," remarked the chief, turning to walk off.

But he had taken only a single step, when the white man, seizing his arm, whirled him backward, and held the muzzle of his revolver almost against his nose.

"You're my prisoner, Big Thunder. If that younker isn't here inside of half an hour your scalp shall be at my girdle."

The chieftain showed no signs of fear, but, looking calmly at the angry man, asked:

"Why do dis? Big Thunder don't speak wid double tongue."

"That makes no difference; I mean what I say; I've explained to you about these visitors of mine; when you lay hands on them you lay hands on me; I told you that a while ago, and you know that I'll do what I say when I tell you that you don't go back to your people till that boy comes here."

It was at this juncture that Jim Halpine quietly walked forward from the gloom and joined the couple. Arkell glanced at his friend, but instantly fixed his eyes on the Ute again, who he meant should not escape.

Halpine was quick to grasp the situation, having heard the last part of the conversation, which was in a louder tone than the rest, and he resorted to a little strategy.

"Shoot him, Amos! Then there will be only a few left, and it won't take us long to clean them out! Shall I save you the trouble by letting some of the firelight into him?"

And as he asked the alarming question, he raised his Winchester, as if eager for the permission.

This little demonstration thoroughly frightened Big Thunder, who, in the belief that his life was in danger, exclaimed:

"Don't shoot! don't shoot me! Gib white boy!"

"Now you're talking sense," observed Arkell, with a smile. "Halpine, keep him covered with your gun, and at the first move let him have it."

"Me go back—send boy here," suggested the chief, though he was so terrified he dared not take a step, lest he might cause the discharge of that terrible rifle pointed at him.

"No, you don't," replied Arkell, who knew that if Big Thunder was allowed to return to his camp, the first thing he would do would be to brain Owen Woodward.

The chieftain looked helplessly at his captor, afraid to suggest any other course of procedure. He was in the power of the white men and could only await their wishes.

Big Thunder might well complain that it was out of his power to do as his masters demanded, unless he were allowed to go back to his camp to carry out his part of the arrangement; but Arkell was equal to the emergency.

He reminded his captive that the two camps were so near that it was easy to signal from one to the other.

He told him to call one of his warriors to the spot, and instruct him to return and bring the white lad, with his gun and all his property intact.

When that was done, Big Thunder would be at liberty to rejoin his people.

Now it will be seen that the Ute leader had good ground for dissatisfaction, since the proposed arrangement placed him at the mercy of the white men, in whose power he would be after the white youth was restored to his friends.

But there was nothing else to do, and, turning his face toward his own camp-fire, he emitted a ringing whoop, which was repeated three times.

In an instant a reply came in the same form from his party.

Even with all the chances in his favor, Arkell was on the watch for treachery. What was to prevent the Utes from stealing near to camp in the darkness and pouring a volley that would slay him and Halpine and leave the others at their mercy?

There really was no reason why such an appalling occurrence should not take place. A few words were spoken to his friend, and the two moved back and joined the Woodwards, where all were out of sight. This reversed matters, since any enemies approaching camp would be revealed by the firelight, while the white men could not be seen.

To prevent any awkward mistakes, Big Thunder was reminded that he was covered by several Winchesters, and, at the first move on his part to leave or do anything, he would be dropped in his tracks. It was hardly necessary to tell the scared chieftain this, for he knew it before.

The whites moved quickly, but they had hardly reached their stations when an Indian warrior stepped from the gloom into the glow of the camp-fire and approached his chief.

The appearance of this Ute was so sudden that he must have been in the vicinity—another proof of the innate treachery of the American Indian.

It could not have taken Big Thunder long to explain matters to his subject, who calmly looked in his face while the grim leader was talking. In the stillness the words were plainly heard, but being in the Indian tongue, no one could form an idea of their meaning.

The warrior did not tarry, but vanished with the same noiselessness that he had appeared on the scene.

The ranchmen knew that the crisis was at hand. Owen Woodward would be produced in the space of a few minutes or a desperate struggle would take place, in which the consequences were sure to be fatal to more than one member on each side.

Arkell whispered to the Woodwards to remain quiescent, and to hold their weapons ready for instant use, but not to fire under any circumstances, unless told to do so.

At such times the minutes seem of interminable length. They

wore slowly away, and still Big Thunder stood as upright and seemingly as motionless as if carved in wood.

No one of the party watched the chieftain more closely than Frank Woodward, whose position was such that the Indian was in exact line with the trunk of a tree just beyond, against which the firelight was reflected.

It was perhaps ten minutes after the departure of the warrior, that the youth became aware of a startling fact. He saw that Big Thunder, instead of remaining directly in line with the tree as at first, was slightly to one side.

Frank had not changed his own position and he knew the tree was where it always had been. It followed, therefore, that Big Thunder must have moved, even though but a few inches.

The youth said nothing, but with his Winchester ready to fire on an instant's notice, kept his eyes on the chieftain.

Five minutes later the savage had shifted so far to the right that he was no longer in line with the trunk of the tree.

The cunning scamp, while seemingly as motionless as a stone, was skillfully using his feet in such a manner that he was actually moving away from the camp-fire.

"Amos," whispered Frank to the ranchman at his elbow, "he is edging away from the fire."

"I'll be hanged if he isn't," muttered Arkell. "I 'spected it but wasn't sure till this minute."

If Big Thunder were left alone a little longer, he was sure to reach a point from which he would deem it safe to duck his head and make a leap out in the gloom, then Owen Woodward was doomed.

But Amos Arkell was a man to take the bull by the horns. Rising on his knees he called out:

"None of that, Big Thunder! I see what you are doing. If you move another inch I'll fire. Come back where you were."

The Ute looked around as if he did not understand the order, but, all the same, he obeyed it with an alacrity which would have been amusing under other circumstances. He quietly stepped back to where he was when talking with the ranchman.

"We have waited long enough," he added in the same warning voice. "That boy must be here mighty quick!"

The chieftain was of the same opinion, for he emitted a signal different from his previous one.

Almost at the same instant a warrior emerged from the gloom and stood beside him, proving, beyond question, that he had been waiting just beyond reach of the firelight.

Arkell was angered to see that the new arrival was alone, but he decided to wait a minute or two for developments.

It was the same warrior that had appeared in response to the first call, and he stood long enough to hold a brief conversation with the chief, who must have apprised him that he had played his last card, and nothing remained but to submit to the inevitable.

Instead of leaving the leader, the warrior faced toward the point from which he had just come, and beckoned to some one who was invisible.

In response, Owen Woodward walked out of the gloom, and stood in full view in the firelight.

At sight of his son, George Woodward became painfully agitated, and was on the point of rising to his feet and rushing forward to embrace him, but his brother laid his hand on his shoulder, and said in a guarded voice:

"Restrain yourself; he is safe!"

The parent sought to do so, though it was almost impossible.

"We will not let him pass out of sight," added Hugh; "he is as safe as he can be."

It was observed that Owen held his Winchester in his hand, so that thus far at least, the demand of Arkell had been complied with. Big Thunder made ready to perform his part of the agreement, provided he was forced to do so.

It was hard for the friends of Owen Woodward to keep quiet, when they saw the captive lad turn his head and look inquiringly around, as if wondering what had become of them.

Everything was left to the cool-headed Arkell, who knew how to do the right thing at the right time. Speaking just loud enough to be heard, he called:

"Come out here, younker; we're waiting for you."

The lad started at the sound of the unfamiliar voice, which he knew was that of a friend, but looked at Big Thunder, as if asking his permission.

The meaning of the look was so plain, that the ranchman added:

"It's all right; never mind him; come right along."

With another inquiring glance, Owen walked away from the camp-fire, and a moment later was among his friends.

Leaving his relatives to greet him, Arkell and Halpine kept the two Utes covered with their Winchesters, and the former said:

"Big Thunder, your part of the business is ended; you can both go back to camp and we won't hurt you unless you try some of your tricks; we shall be on the watch for you."

The chieftain and his companion, without uttering a word, turned their backs on the whites and strode off in the gloom.

With their departure, the restraint that had held the friends of Owen was removed. His father clasped him in his arms, while tears of joy ran down the cheeks of both. The parent murmured his thanks that his darling child, whom he hardly hoped to see again, was at last restored to him without the harming of a hair of his head.

When the father was through and regained the mastery of his emotions, the uncle clasped his hand, after which it was seized by Frank, who, warmly congratulating him, asked:

"How do you feel, old fellow?"

"Hungrier than I ever was in all my life."

"We can do something to help that, I am glad to say. Halpine saved a little from our last meal."

It was speedily produced, and the lad ate enough to satisfy the gnawing pangs of hunger, by which time the ranchmen, having seen the last of Big Thunder and his warrior, were ready to take part in the joyous conversation.

It required only a few minutes for all parties to gain a clear idea of what had taken place since the separation of the cousins the night before in the dugout.

It had been a series of wonderful experiences, indeed, with a most happy ending. The father and uncle at one time did not believe that a ransom of Owen was possible, but calculated that if it did take place, the price demanded would be enormous, and one which, under the peculiar circumstances, would be almost impossible of fulfillment on their part.

But behold, here was the boy with his rifle, and not a penny's worth of anything had been given for him. Big Thunder, the Ute chieftain, had simply been traded off for the prisoner, and it was all due to the masterly management of Amos Arkell and Jim Halpine.

While the Woodwards were disposed to believe that every danger was over, the ranchmen thought otherwise. Big Thunder, like all of his race, was revengeful by nature, and he had been so fully outwitted by Arkell that he would run a great deal of risk to secure revenge. He possessed considerable courage, and was a foe to be feared.

In the darkness, and amid such a rough country, with which the Utes were thoroughly familiar, it would be easy for them to steal near enough to camp to gain a shot or two, which was likely to undo everything that had been accomplished at so much risk and danger.

All admitted the wisdom of the ranchman therefore, when, after explaining his views, he said that, although their animals were in need of rest, they must withdraw without delay, and spend the entire night in placing the utmost distance possible between them and the camp of the Utes.

Accordingly, the ponies were brought from the vicinity of the camp-fire, and without mounting them, the homeward journey began.

The dugout was reached the next afternoon, and the Woodwards spent the night with their friends.

The elder gentlemen hinted at paying the ranchmen for their inestimable services, but the offer was not received pleasantly. However, when Arkell and Halpine, in accordance with their promise, called upon the Woodwards some months later, in St. Louis, they were not only treated with the greatest kindness and hospitality, but each carried away with him a memento of the stirring experiences of the youths in the Platte country.

This souvenir was in the shape of a magnificent gold watch and chain, with an appropriate inscription, and no one will say that the happy and brave ranchmen had not fully earned it.

THE END.

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